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BLACK SUMMONER

AUTHOR: DOUFU MAYOI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY: KUROGIN (DIGS)

THE RED MAIDENS



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"WELL, IT'S..."

"SO, WHAT
WAS IT YOU
WANTED TO
ASK ME?"

MELFINA

KELVIN

EFIL

RION

"WAH,
IT SMELLS
SO GOOD!
THERE'RE
SO MANY
STORES!
BUT WE'RE
IN A
FOREST!"

"THIS REALLY
DOES SCREAM
'FANTASY!'"

RUKA





BLACK SUMMONER

Characters

Outline as of the Previous Volume

Transmigrator from Japan, battle junkie, and Summoner.

The same time that Kelvin—transmigrator from Japan, battle junkie, and Summoner—got promoted as a Rank S adventurer, the Warrior Nation of Trycen declared war on all other major powers on the Eastern Continent and launched a multi-pronged offensive. However, Kelvin and his companions handily intercepted the force led by Crown Prince Azgrad Trycen. Then he and several allies formed the Demon Lord Subjugation Alliance and launched a counteroffensive against Trycen. After much fighting, they eventually succeed in killing Demon Lord Zel Trycen. However, just when they thought things were settling down...

Kelvin

A Summoner who obtained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life. Constantly seeking battles with mighty foes. Alias: "Grim Reaper"

Kelvin's Companions



Efil

A half-elf girl purchased by Kelvin as a slave. The perfect maid. Loves her master deeply.



Sera

A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service. Daughter of a demon lord. Ignorant and knowledgeable in equal measure.



Melfina

Goddess of Reincarnation (currently on leave). Refers to herself as Kelvin's wife. Eats a lot.



Rion

A hero summoned by Kelvin who became his half-sister. Has a rather skewed view of what it means to be a little sister.



Clotho

The first monster Kelvin ever took on as a Follower. Its Storage and ability to create materials make it a key player!



Gerard

The dark knight who serves Kelvin. Dotes on Ruka and Rion as if they're his own grandchildren.



Alex

Kelvin's shadow wolf Follower. Rion's partner. Gets a thorough brushing every day.



Ellie

A maid in Kelvin's house who applied for the job in order to repay him for rescuing her and her daughter, Ruka.



Ruka

An apprentice maid in Kelvin's house. Full of energy. Loved by the whole neighborhood. Every day's a blast!

Parth, the City of Peace

A city located right in between the four great powers of the Eastern Continent. Founded as a symbol of hope for lasting peace.

Rio

Guildmaster of the Parth Adventurer's Guild. Quite the schemer. Alias: "Analyzer."



Ange

A popular receptionist at the guild. May have feelings for Kelvin. Would like more screentime.

Toraj, the Country of Water

Faces the Sea of Dragons. Has very advanced shipbuilding and agricultural industries. Rooted in Japanese culture with staples like rice and tatami.



Tsubaki Fujiwara

Queen of Toraj. Has taken a liking to Kelvin and his companions. Constantly tries to solicit their services.

The Holy Empire of Deramis

A country that worships the Goddess of Reincarnation. Headed by the Pope. Connected to the Rizean Empire on the Western Continent through Crux Bridge, but is at odds with them.



Colette

Oracle of Deramis. Summoned the Heroes. Her fanaticism makes her a bit sick in the head.



Kanzaki Touya

A Hero summoned from Japan. Lucky pervert. Dual wields. Heading for the Western Continent.



Shiga Setsuna

A Hero summoned from Japan. Serious and diligent. Cleans up the problems that Touya causes.



Mizuoka Nana

A Hero summoned from Japan. Partnered with Mun-chan, a flame dragon. Has a comforting aura.



Kuromiya Miyabi

A Hero summoned from Japan. One quarter Russian. Her thoughts are a complete mystery.

Gaun, the Country of Beastkin

The home of the beastkin, who possess superior physical prowess. Its people believe that strength is everything. Crowns the strongest person in the country as king.

Leonhart Gaun

The Beast King of Gaun. Served as proctor for Kelvin's Rank S promotion exam.

Kilto Gaun

The Beast King's third son. A doting brother who thinks Goma, his little sister, is the cutest thing in the world.

Sabato

The Beast King's fourth son. Can't beat Goma in physical or verbal fights.

Goma

The Beast King's only daughter. Princess of Gaun. Always beats Sabato up.

The Military Kingdom of Trycen

A militaristic country that touts human supremacy. Rumored to be kidnapping the citizens of other countries as slaves and up to similarly suspicious endeavors.

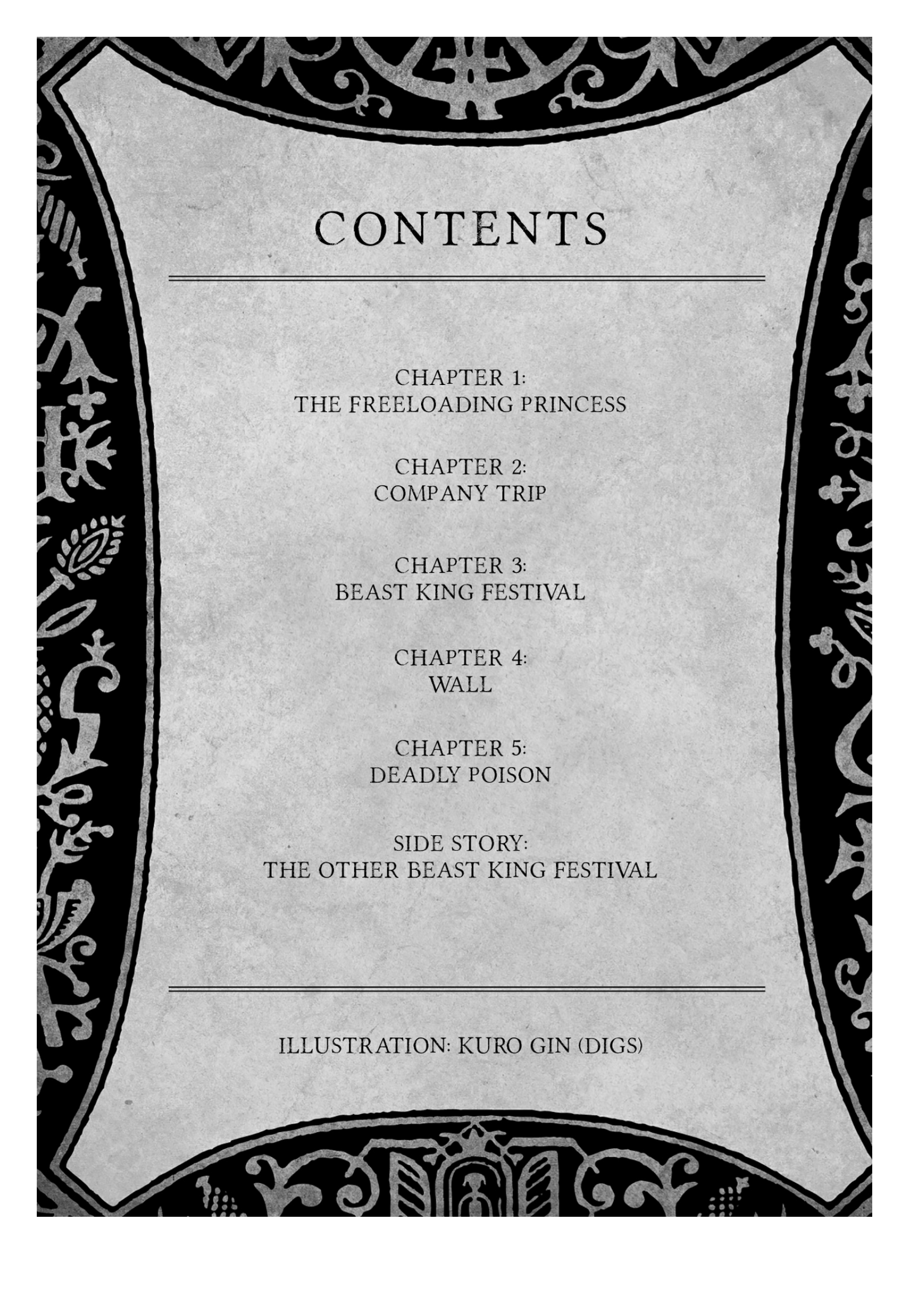


Shutola Trycen

Princess of Trycen. Mind has regressed in age due to the brainwashing from Demon Lord Zel, her late father.

Azgrad Trycen

Crown Prince of Trycen and general of the Dragon Knight Order. Incredibly proficient dragon rider.



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ILLUSTRATION: KURO GIN (DIGS)

Chapter 1: The Freeloading Princess

Everything felt vague and hazy, as if I were inside a dream. The only thing I could see was darkness.

What's happened to me?

“—”

What's that?

“——”

Hello? Is someone out there? Did you just say something?

“———y...”

The voice seemed infinitely far away and yet it was as if it had spoken right next to my ear. *Ugh, my mind's all in a haze.*

“———why...”

I could only make out fragments. *I feel like I've heard this voice before. But I can't put my finger on it...*

“I don't want to regret anything anymore. I—”

A faint silhouette took shape within the darkness. *Who are you?*

::Honey!::

::Kelvin!::

Two loud voices abruptly burst directly into my mind. The darkness was banished by light, and my consciousness rose back to the surface.



I mumbled something unintelligible as I opened my eyes. My mind was still in a bit of a fog, but my body felt warm. I realized that I was wearing my pajamas and had been tucked into bed. Slowly, my eyes registered the unfamiliar ceiling above.

“Honey, you’re finally awake!”

“Gosh! How many days do you think you’ve been sleeping?! We were worried out of our minds!”

Melfina’s and Sera’s faces entered my line of sight from the left and right respectively, the former filled with relief and the latter colored with anger but teary-eyed.

Come on, I just woke up. What’s with those faces? Wait...I just woke up? How long have I been asleep?

“‘Good morning’ is probably not the right thing to say now. What happened to me?” I asked, patting Melfina’s head and wiping away the tears from Sera’s eyes.

“Thank you,” Sera said, holding my hand in both of hers. “Um, do you not remember? After we defeated the Demon Lord, you suddenly collapsed in the middle of me telling you off.”

“Oh, right...”

The memories slowly came back to me. I had indeed been feeling quite out of sorts after the fight was over. *Oh, so I collapsed.*

“You’ve been sleeping for three days, honey. Just now, you were moaning in your sleep, so we thought we should try to wake you.”

“Oh, that’s why. I think I heard your voices in my dream.”

What was with that dream, anyway? I feel like it was tugging at something inside of me...but I guess there isn’t much point in looking for meaning there. Let’s not dwell on it any longer.

“You’re in a guest room in Trycen Castle. Oh, don’t worry. There are guards from all the allied countries here, and above all, Mel and I are here! It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say this is the safest room in the world! There’s no hurry to get up—rest for as long as you need!”

Okay, yeah, I can’t imagine anything in this world capable of making it through such security measures.

“Goodness, how could you collapse on the day you proposed to me? You sure

know how to make a girl cry, honey.”

“You’re definitely using easily un-understandable wording on purpose, aren’t you?”

“There’s no misunderstanding. It was our love that erased the Demon Lord!”

I reached out to stroke Melfina’s blushing face. “I...guess you could say that, sure.”

It was true that Zel had been obliterated by the weird power-up Melfina had received from hiding her embarrassment. If she wanted to call it the power of love, I suppose that’s what it was.

The power of a maiden in love is strong indeed.

The line that Melfina had mistaken for a proposal had not been planned on my part. I didn’t even think it was possible to misconstrue it as a proposal...although hindsight did give me a bit more perspective on that. Regardless, I realized without a doubt that there was no taking it back considering how happy she looked.

Not that I had any intention of doing so. While it wasn’t exactly what I had planned, I too had feelings for her. The moment I saw her there after waking up, I understood why I’d fallen for her at first sight before my transmigration.

I don’t really have the right to talk about integrity to anyone, do I? In the end, I basically ended up liking all the girls in my party. You stupid beast! You lump of worldly desires! But good job, you!

“Looks like me sneaking into your bed every night finally paid off,” Melfina giggled.

Uh, in your case, that actually worked against you, all right?

Normally, a guy would be excited and might have trouble controlling himself when a girl he liked slipped into his bed, but that was definitely not the case with Melfina. The instant her head hit the pillow, she was out like a light. And yet despite being fast asleep, her fists and legs remained extremely active. With her stats, what should have been heart-thumping nights of excitement turned into heart-thumping nights of life-threatening training in a flash. I never even

got close to feeling what I did while sleeping with Sera or Efil whenever I shared the bed with Mel.

Sera sighed. “Okay, look. As I said, I’m fine with this, but you’re going to have to explain it to Efil yourself, all right? Knowing her, her answer’s pretty much set in stone, but this is a matter of courtesy.”

“I know. I’ll make sure to tell her properly. I’m sorry for the trouble I caused you both. Were you looking after me this whole time?” I asked, having noticed the towel and bucket full of water on the end table next to my bed.

“Oh, it’s fine!” Sera exclaimed, her cheeks reddening. “You looked after me too, so now w-w-we’re a match!”

You mean we’re even, right? But that was cute, so I’ll pretend I didn’t hear it.

“We’re not as skilled as Efil, but we did our best,” Mel added.

“Thank you, Melfina. Thank you, Sera. I really appreciate what you did for me.” I looked at each girl in turn and patted their heads.

Speaking of which, why is Efil not here? She’s normally the one who’d insist on taking care of me. It seems out of character for her to let these two take her place.

“By the way, where’s Efil?”

“Right after you collapsed, she also came down with a fever,” Mel replied.

“EFIL TOO?!”

Sera nodded. “It wasn’t just her. Rion and Gerard as well, although in Gerard’s case, he didn’t get a fever, but he was groaning like, ‘I feel something coming out, grrr.’”

I jumped up in a panic. *What’s going on?! My beloved maid and little sister are also suffering from a fever right now?! Wasn’t Rion’s Vigor skill supposed to protect her from illnesses?! This is no time to be stuck in bed! I’ve got to heal them with the most powerful White Magic spell in my arsenal! If that’s not enough, I’ll have to develop a new spe—*

Before I could get out of bed, Sera forcefully pressed me back down. “You’re the last one to wake up. Everyone is fine, so you stay right where you are!”

“Honey, I get how you feel, but calm down. Everyone else has already recovered. We were looking after you just in case, that’s all.”

“I... I see. Sorry, I panicked...” *All right, they’re both fine. That’s a relief.*

“And it wouldn’t hurt you to spare a thought for Gerard, honey.”

“Mel’s right! Gerard did well with his Evolution too!”

“I keep telling you not to read my mi— Wait, Evolution?” *Weren’t we all sick?*

“Yes, honey, Evolution.”

“Yep, Evolution!”

“Uh...who Evolved?”

“Efil, Rion, Gerard, and—”

“You, Kelvin!”

I froze. After a moment, my mind rebooted, and I took a look at myself. I couldn’t see any differences. I patted my arms, legs, chest, and...

Whew, that part’s fine. Ha ha ha, what kind of joke are these two trying to pull? I’m the same as I’ve always been. See, even Analyze Eye shows—

Kelvin (23 y/o, Male, Daemon, Summoner)

Level: 120

Title: Grim Reaper

HP: 1,940/1,940

MP: 18,000/18,000 (+12,000)

Strength: 741 (+160)

Endurance: 673 (+160)

Agility: 1,380

Magic: 2,340 (+160)

Luck: 1,819

Skills: Magic Overclock (Unique Skill), Parallel Processing (Unique Skill), Sword

Mastery (Rank B), Scythe Mastery (Rank S), Summoning (Rank S) [Available Slots: 2], Green Magic (Rank S), White Magic (Rank S), Analyze Eye (Rank S), Flight (Rank B), Presence Sensing (Rank A), Danger Detection (Rank A), Concealment (Rank S), Nerves of Steel (Rank B), Army Command (Rank A), Smithing (Rank S), Spirit (Rank S), Herculean Strength (Rank B), Iron Wall (Rank B), Magic Enhancement (Rank B), Double Growth Rate, Double Skill Points, Experience Sharing

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Goddess of Reincarnation, Concealment (Rank S)

Mommy Clare and Daddy Uld in Parth, how are you? I've got some news to share. I woke up and found out that I'm no longer human.



Sera and Melfina suggested that we get the gang together for my first meal in three days, and I agreed, so they brought me to a room that looked like a dining hall. We passed quite a few soldiers and servants on our way, all of whom looked surprised to see me. They saluted, bowed, or did other things expressing respect before quickly scurrying away.

Uh, what'd I do?

"That startled me! So, that's Kelvin-sama, the champion who defeated the Demon Lord! Looks like the rumor about his fondness for sensual pleasures is true."

"Huh, so that's the heathen who led Colette-sama astray. Heh heh heh, you just wait..."

"Hey, hey, did you hear? That's Kelvin-sama, Efil-san's master!"

"He's not as handsome as the rumors say. Clive was a lot more— Hm? Strange, I have a feeling Clive wasn't as handsome as I remember."

"I can't really remember what he looked like either...but hey, I kinda dig the new champion. He looks nice, don't you think?"

My physical capabilities had apparently been greatly bolstered by my Evolution. Part of that included enhanced hearing, which allowed me to clearly

pick up all the whispered conversations going on around me.

That second guy is a member of Colette's fan club, right? Live strong, man—I hope you keep your pure image of her for as long as possible. I'd even welcome assassination attempts, but I'm kinda curious what you think you can do at Level 13. Would you be hiring mercenaries? If so, please find the most powerful and feared master you can. Well, let's put a marker on the guy just in case, so that I can erase him in a split second if he tries anything funny against Rion to get to me.

“Honey, you're thinking something weird again, aren't you? You have that grin on your face.”

“Wait, I do?” *Oops, I was so happy about having a new thing to look forward to that I couldn't help it.*

“You're still recuperating, so make sure you don't push yourself, Kelvin! It's a bit early still, but Efil will be along with lunch soon, so just sit tight till then. Cooking was the last duty she vehemently refused to relinquish.”

“All right, I will. What's everyone else doing right now?”

“Well, first...”

After I shot the breeze with the two of them for a while longer, I noticed markers on my map rushing towards our location at incredible speed. The signatures belonged to Rion and Gerard, with Rion being slightly faster.

“You're up, Kel-nii!”

“Whoa! Ha ha ha, nice to see you're just the same, Rion!”

Upon spotting me, my sister immediately dove into my chest. Of course, as any brother worth his salt would have done, I saw it coming and made sure to catch her properly. Then I used the momentum to swing her around two or three times as we rejoiced together. *I will name this spell Wonderful Little Sister Spiral!*

“I'm sorry I made you worry. How're you doing?”

“My fever went down the day before yesterday! Gramps also finished his Evolution around the same time I woke up, so we went training together! Efil-

nee's Evolution ended yesterday."

"I'm glad to hear it. Same as me, your appearance didn't really change mu—
Huh?"

"What?"

The two of us stared closely at each other, still locked in a hug.

Um, she looks exactly the same as before, but why do I feel like she's a lot more dazzling now? It's as if there's this light illuminating her silhouette or she's emitting a brilliant aura of some sort! Am I just imagining it?!

"Um...what did you Evolve into, by the way?"

"Aha ha ha, why do you even ask, Kel-nii? You can just see it with Analyze Eye, right?"

I'm kind of scared to! At least, I want to hear it from your mouth.

"Well, all right. I Evolved from human to saint! Oh! Is it the same for you?!"

"Uh..."

Rion (14 y/o, Female, Saint, Sword Saint)

Level: 114

Title: Black Meteor

HP: 1,480/1,480

MP: 2,399/2,399

Strength: 1,322

Endurance: 690 (+320)

Agility: 2,175

Magic: 1,884 (+320)

Luck: 1,367

Skills: Residual Slice (Unique Skill), Absolute Purification (Unique Skill), Sword Mastery (Rank S), Dual Wield (Rank S), Acrobatics (Rank S), Covert Action (Rank S), Sky Walk (Rank S), Red Magic (Rank S), Danger Detection (Rank A), Mind's

Eye (Rank A), Nerves of Steel (Rank A), Companionship (Rank S), Vigor (Rank S), Iron Wall (Rank A), Magic Enhancement (Rank A), Double Growth Rate, Double Skill Points

Passive Effects: Concealment (Rank S)

We didn't get the same thinggggg! "Saint" is... Well, okay, I admit that does suit Rion. But why am I a 'daemon'? What is a daemon, anyway?! It's different from a demon, right?

"Kel-nii?"

"Um, I, er, became a daemon."

"A...daemon?" Rion's eyes widened.

Did I disappoint her? Is she shocked by the fact that her blood brother—wait, no, we're not actually connected by blood—her brother up and turned into a being that's the exact opposite of her?

"That's... THAT'S SO COOL!"

"What?"

"That's incredible! Aww, I wanted to get daemon too! You're, like, 'Oh, I'm the fallen being who controls arcane magic!' That's so amazingly cool! Kel-nii, you haven't picked up any new skills with your SP yet, right? Let's brainstorm together later!"

The sight of Rion squealing as her eyes blazed with joy and excitement was a perfect illustration of her new race. No, I take that back—she was an angel. She was an angel who had descended to this world! Mel—an actual angel—looked somewhat disgruntled, but that was the plain truth and I wasn't going to apologize for it.

"My king! You are well!"

"Kelvin-sama, I heard the news! Please give me the honor of officiating your ceremony!"

More familiar faces joined us in the dining hall. I had known Gerard was coming, but Colette was with him, probably having smelled me waking up or

found out by some other ludicrous method.

Hmm, let's see...

Gerard (138 y/o, Male, Hades Knight King, Dark Knight)

Level: 121

Title: Sword Guru

HP: 12,700/12,700 (+8,400) (+100)

MP: 527/527 (+100)

Strength: 2,483 (+320) (+100)

Endurance: 2,619 (+320) (+100)

Agility: 501 (+100)

Magic: 398 (+100)

Luck: 644 (+100)

Skills: Glory Within Mine Hands (Unique Skill), Self-Transcendence (Unique Skill), Sword Mastery (Rank S), Danger Detection (Rank A), Mind's Eye (Rank S), Armored Skin (Rank A), Riding (Rank B), Army Command (Rank A), Teaching (Rank A), Auto Healing (Rank A), Fortitude (Rank S), Herculean Strength (Rank A), Iron Wall (Rank A), Materialization, Dark Damage Invulnerability, Greater Slicing Damage Resistance

Passive Effects: Self-Transcendence/Demon Sword Dainsleif++, Self-Transcendence/Dreadnought++, Self-Transcendence/Crimson Mantle++, Self-Transcendence/Goddess's Ring++, Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S), Concealment (Rank S)

The upgrade that Gerard had gotten gave him such an overwhelming aura of intimidation that I would have believed it if someone had told me he was a suit of armor that had once belonged to a Demon Lord. His new race name was Hades Knight King—*Dude, you're a king now?!—*and his stats were powerful enough for him to have stood his ground against Demon Lord Zel on his own. I also noticed that both of his Unique Skills had changed.

“I’m glad to see you two so full of energy. Hold on, Gerard; it’s not just your armor that changed—is that still Dainsleif?”

“You have a sharp eye, my king! It is, but it has a new appearance thanks to my new skill, Self-Transcendence. Not only does the skill improve the performance of my equipment, it gives it a cosmetic improvement! Of course, the performance increase is significantly more than what Self-Modification offered. But most importantly, get this: I can freely take my equipment off!”

“So it’s a direct upgrade to Self-Modification! I’m happy for you.”

Being able to easily take off and change his gear is a big deal. I haven’t been able to regularly improve his stuff because giving him a new set meant permanently losing the others, but that’s obviously been resolved. I can’t wait to stand in front of a forge again!

“Do you not also have an abundance of SP from your Evolution, my king? I haven’t spent mine either! Let us put our minds together for a strategy meeting after this!”

“Uh...sure. Later, then.” *Please don’t say the same thing Rion did while you loom over me with your brand new menacing look. Ahem. I can ask about his other new Unique Skill later. Colette’s been standing completely still next to me this whole time.*

“Kelvin-sama, I heard the news! Please give me the honor of officiating your ceremony!”

“You...didn’t have to repeat yourself. I heard you the first time.” *Now you’ve gone and ruined my efforts to ignore what you said earlier. Let me guess, Melfina put you up to this?*

I couldn’t think of any other way to handle it, so I simply whispered in Colette’s ear, “I may actually need your services sometime soon. When that happens, I’ll reach out.”

“Ye— Of cou— ’Kay! I-I-I’ll dedicate all of Deramis’s resources to making it the most amazing wedding possible! Wait, I know! I’ll have my father—he’s the pope—officiate inste—”

Hey, even I have no idea what kind of wedding we’ll be having! Knowing that

we can count on someone we trust to officiate gives me peace of mind, but we probably won't be getting around to it anytime soon.

“Whoa, hold on, dial it back. We’re not looking for something *that* grand. All we want is your blessing. For now, stop that nosebleed of yours. Here’s my handkerchief.”

“Th-Thank you very much! I’ll take it through the necessary procedures for storing it as a holy relic!”

“No, just wash it and give it back to me, please.”

Who the heck would worship a piece of cloth soaked with the Oracle’s blood? Wait, would that fanatic from earlier? Man, it’s such a crazy idea, I can’t even wrap my mind around it.

Suddenly, a weak voice spoke up from outside the dining hall door. “C-Colette-chan? Can I come in?”

Although the tone sounded young, the voice was that of a girl just under twenty. The disparity was a bit jarring.

“Of course you can! Don’t be afraid; everyone here is very kind. Come on, Shutola-chan.”

The stranger peering into the room was Shutola, the princess of Trycen.



“An aftereffect of the brainwashing, huh? I thought everyone returned to normal the moment the Demon Lord died.”

“That is indeed the case for most, but perhaps due to having suffered direct and intense brainwashing, Shutola-chan’s mind remains in a state of regression, as you can see. What’s more, her memory is quite spotty. Thankfully, this means she’s forgotten about what happened to King Zel. At the very least, she’s been spared the grief of losing her father. Mel-sama and I did what we could with our magic, but this appears to be a psychological issue and not a physical one. There’s not much left to do but hope she heals with time...”

Colette trailed off, shooting Shutola a brief look. The way the princess was chatting with Rion, with a big smile on her face and a plushie in her arms, made

her look very much like a child.

“It was the Demon Lord who was behind the whole war. We do want to take advantage of this opportunity to do what we can to correct the prejudices that citizens of this country have towards those of other races, but the Alliance’s end goal is to guide the nation towards picking itself back up. Now that King Zel is gone, the only other person competent and qualified enough to seize the reins is Shutola-chan. She is deeply trusted by her people, is incredibly brilliant, and has a strong, unshakable core. At least, that used to be the case. Currently, we have no choice but to find a standin to take her place until she recovers.”

“A standin? Can’t Azgrad do it? He’s the crown prince and carries the name of the country too.” *Although he’s also a hopeless battle junkie...*

“Unfortunately, that’s exactly how the situation is turning out, even though I keep telling everyone I’m not suitable for the role. Yo, Kelvin, looks like you’re still alive and kicking. You here for lunch too?”

Speak of the devil and all that. There was Azgrad, decked out in an extremely extravagant outfit—a marked departure from the norm. He had been almost exclusively wearing combat equipment while in Parth, so the new look seemed out of place to me.

“Trycen has a total of five princes, including Crown Prince Azgrad,” Colette explained. “However, princes two through five have all disappeared. A search is underway, but we’ve yet to find any solid leads.”

Azgrad scoffed, “They probably all slipped away during the commotion or died in a ditch somewhere. It might be a bit harsh coming from me as their brother, but every last one of them was a piece of shit that would run this country into the ground if they assumed the throne.”

I did meet one of them before. It was the third one...I think? My condolences to Azgrad for having to deal with a total of four of them in his life.

“So, what’s it like suddenly having to lead the whole country? Did you have trouble explaining to your citizens that Zel was a Demon Lord?” I asked.

Colette took it upon herself to answer. “General Dan of the Steel Knight Order will be serving as the crown prince’s aide, and all three nations of the Alliance

will assist them as much as possible. Of course, that includes helping them phase out the parts of their slave-trading industry that have gone too far. That said, statecraft is our area of expertise, so you can leave it to us, Kelvin-sama, and do whatever it is you need to do.”

Fair enough. I have a feeling this highly capable Oracle can take care of things. She won't go berserk as long as Melfina isn't accidentally involved somehow... I hope. Well, even if she does, the Beast King and Tsubaki-sama will stop her. Let's trust Colette here. I have zero interest in national politics, after all.

“Basically, I'm just the figurehead till Shutola gets back,” Azgrad added. “It's gonna be boring just warming the seat for her, but she's done a lot for me. It was thanks to her pulling the strings that I was allowed to do whatever I wanted in the military. This is my chance to repay the favor.”

“I see. Well, I hope she gets better soon.”

“Mm. And until then, make sure you take good care of her!”

“Of c—” I started. “Wait, what?”

Stop pat...actually, you're pounding my shoulders! Ow! Seriously, stop! And what the hell did you just say?

“Have you not spoken with Mel-sama?” Colette asked. “Shutola-chan will be recuperating at your residence, Kelvin-sama.”

“Sorry, I'm having trouble understanding what you're saying. Uh, why my place?”

“Things will be chaotic here in Trycen for a while. Thanks to you, our military strength's been more than halved. We'll be busy building it back up, but while we do so, there might be assholes taking advantage of the situation to target Shutola. When I mentioned this at a meeting the other day, someone suggested moving her to a safe place far from the Trycenian political infighting. And, well...the suggestion was accepted.”

“And that ‘safe place’ would be...”

“Yes, Kelvin-sama,” Colette confirmed. “Your residence.”

“It's probably *the* safest house in the world, ain't it?” Azgrad said. “I once

heard Shutola say that even her lackeys couldn't get any information on your place during the war."

Why was such a huge decision made without the homeowner's input?! Our place is a deadly haunt inhabited by a terrifying wolf, giant dragons, and a permanently starving goddess! It's no place for a weak, frail princess to live!

"Oh, I was the one who suggested it!" Rion interjected. "Since Shutola-chan's getting along really well with Alex. Um...should I not have?"

I promptly got onto one knee in front of the young woman who was clutching her teddy bear. "Princess Shutola, I am Kelvin, an adventurer who will have the honor of serving you for a while. Please let me know if there is anything you need."

I guess we're partly at fault for exhausting Trycen's military strength. This is the least we can do in recompense.

"Um, th-thank you...for inviting me..."

While she did give me an answer, for some reason, she did so from behind Rion's back. But due to being significantly taller than Rion, she wasn't very well hidden.

Why's she so scared? I'm not giving my usual smile right now, am I?

Azgrad chuckled, "Oh, this sure brings back memories! Right, Shutola really was shy at that age."

"Indeed," Colette agreed, nodding with a wistful expression. "At the risk of being disrespectful, I agree that the sight of her makes me recall the past."

Shutola pouted. "Jeez! Esteemed brother Azgrad and Colette-chan, stop teasing me! You're both meanies!"

The burst of speech proved that Shutola was indeed only shy around strangers. In other words, it was going to take a bit more time before she would open up to us...with Rion being the exception, of course.

Melfina, can you make another Clip of Camouflage?

::Ah, I see what you're thinking. Sure. I only need a few hours.::

Okay, just one, please.

At the moment, there was a large contrast between the princess's appearance and her mannerisms, so I was thinking of helping to bridge the gap by giving her the option to look more like the age she felt.

Oh, Efil's marker has appeared on the map. She's moving pretty slowly and is being followed by a few other signatures. Ah!

Soon enough, my maid opened the door and walked in, pushing a serving cart. Behind her were several women also in maid uniforms doing the same thing, indicating they were likely in the castle's employ. As they bustled about, serving the food-laden plates, Efil came straight over to me.

"Master, I am relieved to see you are well. I am truly sorry for not having been beside you when you awoke." Although her words were measured and calm, her ears were twitching furiously, reminding me of a dog's tail.

"Oh, don't worry about it. All that matters is you're also okay. Looks like your ears got longer, huh?"

"Yes, they became as long as a normal elf's during my Evolution. Ummm...Master?"

Efil's face had turned red, probably because I had unconsciously reached out and started playing with her ears. I noticed the other maids sneaking glances our way and squealing quietly.

What did you tell them, Efil? Never mind. First things first: your Status!

Efil (16 y/o, Female, High Elf, Battle Maid)

Level: 119

Title: Bombing Princess

HP: 1,108/1,108

MP: 3,463/3,463

Strength: 503

Endurance: 500

Agility: 3,306 (+640)

Magic: 2,159 (+160)

Luck: 1,687 (+1,437)

Skills: Blue Flame (Unique Skill), Divine Restitution (Unique Skill), Archery (Rank S), Red Magic (Rank S), Farsight (Rank A), Covert Action (Rank A), Service (Rank S), Cooking (Rank S), Sewing (Rank S), Cleaning (Rank A), Acute Reflexes (Rank S), Magic Enhancement (Rank B), Double Growth Rate, Double Skill Points

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Flame Dragon King, Concealment (Rank S)

High elves are considered a superior race to normal elves, right? So that's why her ears grew. And like Rion and Gerard, she's gotten a few Unique Skills. Doesn't look like she's assigned her SP yet either.

We dug into the food straight away. It was still a bit early, but we cleaned our plates—not that there was a chance we'd ever leave food on the table with Melfina around.



We have returned! Home sweet home!

As we had done so many times, we walked the path connecting the Parth Adventurer's Guild and our house, approaching the front gate where golems Two and Three stood guard. How had we gotten back so fast? The answer was simple: Azgrad had added the Trycenian national crest to my rainbow-colored Rank S guild card, granting me authorization to use their teleportation gate. Now, with the exception of Deramis, I could freely use all the gates on the Eastern Continent.

Since the commotion surrounding the Demon Lord is mostly over, maybe it would be a good idea to pay Toraj and Gaun a visit.

The Clip of Camouflage I had requested from Melfina had been firmly fastened to Shutola's hair before we'd set out. The end product was even better than Sera's—not only did it alter her features, it could alter her entire appearance as well, clothing included. There was one limitation: the new look had to be of the same race as the wearer, but it was more than handy enough

to merit its Rank S rating. Shutola merely had to picture her mental image of herself and pour MP into the clip. She now looked like a seven-or eight-year-old version of herself, but I hadn't been sure how true to life it was. I knew she would definitely be considered a grandchild by Gerard now, but that was beside the point.

After she'd put on the barrette, I had brought her around to the people who had known her since she was young, and the responses I got were interesting, to say the least.

A certain weirdo Oracle had said, "Shutola-chan?! Now you even *look* like you did back then!"

A certain grizzled old man had said, "Never had I imagined I would be blessed with the opportunity to see Shutola-sama look this way again! Ugh, Jin is a fool for missing out on this miracle! Where on earth is he idling around at a time like this?!"

And a certain battle-loving prince had said, "Damn, that sure is a nostalgic look. I still remember when she would follow me around all day long."

Based on everyone's reactions, I concluded that her current appearance was indeed faithful to how she had looked as a child. I had not expected Dan to be so overcome with emotion as to burst into tears, but I figured it just went to show how much he had cared for her since she was young.

I had Clotho collect all of the stuffed toys in the princess's room, per her request, then we did a final check for anything she might have forgotten. When it came time to head to Parth, Dan was sniffing the whole way to the teleportation gate.

Maybe we should call him Gramps Dan too.

Colette was going to remain in Trycen, as she had mountains of things to take care of. I wanted to tell her, "Hang in there," but I suspected that doing so would cause her to literally work until she collapsed, so I only vocalized a moderate amount of support.

Just as we were about to step through the gate, she told me, "Touya, Setsuna, Nana, and Miyabi will be returning to Deramis soon. Now that the Demon Lord

has been defeated—even though it wasn't done by them—their duties as Heroes have been fulfilled. I'm sure you already know, but they will be given a choice to remain in this world or return to their own. We will send word to you and Mel-sama when they arrive. We would appreciate it very much if you could spare the time for a quick visit."

Colette bowed her head in entreaty, with Captain Cliff following suit. "Please consider this a request from me as well. I'm sure it would make the four of them happy to see you."

Oh, right, the Heroes are supposed to get a reward after the Demon Lord is defeated. Even though we were the ones who did the actual fighting, it doesn't change the fact that four high schoolers were called to this world without their consent. They deserve to be compensated. And technically, it was our goddess who facilitated everything.

I shot Mel a look and a message through the Network.

When I actually stop to think about it, I'm a different story, but you have to be there, don't you? You're technically involved in the whole thing.

::I suppose I do have a job to do. Ughhh, I don't want to work....::

You know, Melfina, I seem to remember you claiming you take your job seriously when I first came to this world. What happened to that claim?

There was a part of me that was starting to seriously worry we might have been spoiling our goddess a bit too much. It wasn't as if I didn't understand the feeling of coming back to work after a holiday, but still. *We may have to hold her to a healthier lifestyle—just like the one I'm living. We can't have her setting a bad example for Princess Shutola, after all.*

On a side note, Colette was going to help deal with the rumor going around about me being a Hero. She said she would spread the story that she had summoned one more Hero but that they had already returned to their own world.

"Gerard-sama, Sera-chan, Kelvin-chan, looks like we're parting ways here," Prettia said mournfully before turning away dramatically. "Oh, but don't cry for me! Our hearts will always be connected!"

“Oh? Uh, indeed. I wish you the best,” Gerard managed.

“Aww, Prettia-chan, we’ll meet again, won’t we?” asked Rion.

I observed the dynamic between the three of them. *I’ve already seen this so many times, can I just ignore it? No can do?*

It had been decided that Prettia and Sabato’s group would be going their own way. Apparently, something was happening in Gaun that made them want to travel while training against monsters on the way. If anything, it was the girls in my party and Dahak who were reluctant to accept the parting, whereas Gerard looked relieved. I heard later that the reason Dahak hadn’t been in the dining hall with the rest of us was because he had been running around in search of Prettia.

Will the day ever come when his efforts pay off? Even then, I’m not sure I’d want to see it...

“Hey, Kelvin, thanks for everything,” Sabato said, clasping my arm. “My old man’s already given you the authorization for using our teleportation gate, right? When you come to Gaun, we’ll give you a huge welcome.”

Goma smiled knowingly. “With what’s coming up soon, I’m sure you’ll enjoy your stay very much.”

“Uh, what’s coming up soon?”

“It’s still a secret for now. You’ll find out eventually.”

It sounds like she’s referring to something specific, but I have no idea what it is. What, are you guys going to throw us a whole festival or something? Oh, and then I suddenly find myself being attacked by the Beast King! I don’t care how it starts. All that matters is that it ends in a battle. I’m looking forward to it, Sabato!

And that was largely how our parting went. Then we stepped through the teleportation gate and found Ange waiting for us on the Parthian side. Guildmaster Rio was absent, probably busily running around dealing with the aftermath of the Demon Lord’s defeat.

Ange told us we were going to get a cash prize for our achievement, but given

the amount of time required to gather such a sum, it would be handed to us at the celebration ceremony—*Ugh, another ceremony?*—along with decorative medals from the heads of state of each country on the Eastern Continent.

Tsubaki-sama is definitely going to redouble her efforts to recruit us too. I can already feel it.

“Welcome back, Kelvin-sama.”

“No irregularities were detected during your absence.”

As we approached our front gate, Two and Three opened it for us. While they were at it, I informed them that Shutola was now a fully authorized resident.

Rion turned to the princess. “Shutola-chan, this is our house, and now it’s yours too!”

“What a big house! You’re a noble, Rion-chan?”

“Aha ha, I’m not a noble. Let me take you on a tour!” She grabbed Shutola’s hand and pulled her inside.

Looks like my trustworthy sister’s got things handled.

While I was watching the two run off, Ellie came outside with Rosalia and Huba, who had returned just before us.

Ellie bowed and said, “Welcome back, Master,” prompting the other two to do the same.

“We’re back,” I replied lightly. “Sorry we were away for so long again. We’ve largely taken care of all the big requests, so we’ll be staying home and taking it easy for a while.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Master. Ruka has been feeling somewhat lonely. Ah, yes, we have been instructing the golems to take care of Dahak-sama’s garden according to his instructions, but sprouts appeared the other day —”

“You hear that, Gerard? Dahak?”

“I’M COMING, RUKA! GRANDPA IS BACK!”

“I’M COMING, MY CUTE PLANTS! I’LL GIVE YOU ENOUGH LOVE TO MAKE UP

FOR THE TIME I'VE BEEN GONE!"

With a whole lot of crashing and banging, Gerard dashed into the house as Dahak shot off towards his crops around back. My party members were very passionate, to put it mildly. Gerard was always like that when we returned home, but I thought his face looked liberated today, as if he had just been freed from some burden. Not that I could see his face...

Still, dude, did you forget your appearance changed during your Evolution? What do you think Ruka is going to say when you rush at her in your "I look like armor worn by a Demon Lord" body? I mean, look how surprised Ellie is.

"Are they acting like that to distract themselves from the pain of parting with Goldiana-sama?" Efil asked pensively.

Melfina murmured, "Is that what it's like having a long-distance relationship?"

"As they say, it's complicated!" Sera replied with her characteristic knowing look.

I'm glad to see you three enjoying the girl talk, but I'm pretty sure you're misunderstanding the old knight.

I cleared my throat. "Ahem. Rosalia and Huba, are you sure about remaining with us in Parth? The moment you came to Trycen as reinforcements, all the restraints woven into your uniforms were disabled. You're free to go home, you know."

"We're remaining here as Shutola-sama's guards," Rosalia replied. "Regardless of what he might say, Azgrad-sama does care quite a bit about her. Rather, the onus is on us to ask you for permission. Will you allow us to stay here in our current capacity until Shutola-sama is herself again?"

"We'll do our best, both as maids and as guards! Please!"

The two of them bowed.

"Sure, I'm totally fine with it. Thank you for offering, really. Now I don't have to worry about the princess being lonely."

And it's maid uniforms. Of course I'm gonna say yes.

Rosalia bowed once more. "Thank you for being understanding."

Which means I now have to decide on an appropriate salary for the both of them. After all, I firmly believe in properly compensating employees for their work. Hey, I'll even add on a bit as thanks for wearing the work uniform!

“Phew, I’m glad that’s out of the way.” Huba surveyed our group. “Um, so, where is Shutola-sama? I don’t see her here.”

“What are you saying, Huba? You just passed her; she was with Rion.”

“Huh?”

Huba, as it happened, was not familiar with how Shutola had looked as a child. In contrast, Rosalia wore an “Ah, I thought so” expression. The difference in their reactions was likely due to the difference in how long they had been serving Trycen.

Well, it’s about time for us to head inside too. I’m technically still recuperating.

“My king, a moment, please?”

“Master, a moment, please?”

Just as I stepped through the entranceway, I was called aside by Gerard and Ruka, the latter of whom was riding on the former’s shoulders.

Looks like they managed to reunite without mishap.

“There’s something I want to talk with you about later, my king.”



The moon climbed into the sky as the night deepened, illuminating the balcony of my house where a private drinking party was underway. Gerard and I were sharing a bottle of local sake from Trycen, which we had bought on Dan’s enthusiastic recommendation, and snacks made by Efil. This specific brand was a bit too fiery for my taste, but the knight across from me seemed to have no trouble downing cup after cup, looking none the worse for it. I couldn’t help but wish he’d been able to share some of his tolerance for alcohol with Sera.

“A dwarf who called himself Jildora, huh?” I murmured, sipping from my own glass.

The matter that Gerard wanted to discuss with me was the mysterious man

named Jildora whom he had encountered during the fight in Trycen.

“Indeed. That is what he called himself, according to Dahak. It’s the same name as the elf who claimed to be a general of the Rizean Empire and brought ruin to my homeland, Alcahl. When I think back on the fight, I cannot help but see the similarities between the elf Jildora from long ago and the dwarf Jildora from Trycen, especially their manners of speech and auras. However, what happened to me was a lifetime ago. Perhaps my memory has been affected by age.”

I paused to take another sip. “Do you remember what I told you about Colette’s response when I asked her about ‘a Rizean elven general named Jildora’?”

Right after I was promoted to Rank S, a dinner party had been held in my honor. Colette had been in attendance, so I had approached her to pick her brain about Rizea. After speaking with her, I had wanted to share the information with Gerard immediately, but this knightly grandpa had fallen asleep as soon as he got home, and, well, quite a lot happened to me that night. I had only managed to share what Colette had said with him the next morning.

“There was indeed one such general, but he had died several decades ago. His body was discovered mauled by monsters and torn to shreds. I remember thinking it a fitting end for him and feeling a burden lift from my shoulders even though it meant I had lost any chance at avenging my wife and country.”

Since then, Jildora had disappeared from the public sphere in Rizea and his name had never come up again. However, on the off chance he had managed to survive somehow...

“Whoever this new Jildora is, one thing is for sure: he’s dangerous. The specs of the golem he manned are off the charts, and it bothers me how deeply he managed to entrench himself as a merchant in Trycen. Clive seemed to know him too, and there’s always the possibility he was somehow involved in this ‘other reincarnation’ Mel was talking about. Biggest problem is, I can’t figure out what he’s after.”

“Hmm...in other words, we don’t have enough information to act on.”

“We don’t even have conclusive proof that the two are the same person. All

we can do is gather information and build up our strength in preparation for whatever comes our way.”

“In short, the same thing we’ve already been doing?”

“I...guess so, yeah. Want me to talk to Mel? See if she knows anything else or has any insights?”

Of course, at this hour, she’s probably fast asleep. She goes to bed early, wakes up late, and sleeps like a log. Rousing her would take more effort than it’s worth, so let’s do that first thing tomorrow instead.

“I suppose that’s all we can do, in which case that’s it for this talk. Wine should be enjoyed, so let’s change the subject!”

“You sure change gears fast.”

Gerard’s tone lost its edge and took on a mischievous note. The serious atmosphere from moments before had disappeared without a trace.

“Do things when you can do them! Enjoy things when you can enjoy them! That is the trick to getting the most out of life. You would do well to keep that in mind, my king, though I suppose you already put it into practice.”

“I’m aware I’m blessed in that regard.”

“So, how far have you gone with Princess? Have you already done *it*?”

“ACK!”

The snack I had just put into my mouth went down the wrong way as I choked with surprise at the sudden jab. For the briefest of moments, I thought he was referring to Shutola before remembering that “Princess” was how he referred to Melfina. It was *very* confusing. I quickly grabbed my glass and washed the morsel of food down with wine.

“Gerard, are you trying to get Efil to kill me?”

“With the snack, or...”

“I have no idea what you’re insinuating!” *Efil would never hurt me!*

“Hey, you can tell me. We’re just two guys here, right?”

What’s this, locker room talk between high school boys on a school trip? Not

that I remember what that was like. Either way, my answer is...

“It’s a secret.”



I bathed in the rays of the morning sun next to the fountain in our garden where Clotho was lazily floating. I took in the refreshing morning with every pore of my body as I reached out both hands towards the clear, blue sky.

I even did a stretch. “See, Mel? Waking up early is great, isn’t it?”

The only reply I got was a yawn.

“You...look sleepy.”



Melfina's cute mouth opened again in another yawn. It was currently seven in the morning—much earlier than when the goddess would normally be awake. Previously, I would have just let her be, but things were different today. In order for her to carry out a well-regulated and disciplined lifestyle, I had convinced her to match my sleeping habits as closely as possible. Back when I'd first brought it up, the look on her face was like that of a goddess who had just seen the end of a world. However, when I told her "This is necessary if we are to live together as husband and wife," she immediately perked up and responded, "Honey, let's go to sleep and wake up together at the same time starting tomorrow!"

What an easy goddess to appease.

"Because I was so sleepy, I couldn't eat all that much for breakfast..."

"Don't worry. You being sleepy had nothing to do with it."

Normally, Melfina ate breakfast by herself at a later hour. As such, she would get to have an entire table of food all to herself. This time, she was part of a group eating together, which meant that fewer side dishes made it onto her plate. Her appetite wasn't something that could be mollified by sleepiness. Plus, she'd had several huge servings of rice to make up for it.

Speaking of which, Princess Shutola had looked entirely fascinated by my using chopsticks to eat. After all, no one used chopsticks in Trycen. My house was well-stocked with ones we'd bought from Toraj, freely available for anyone who wanted to use them. That included Rion and me, of course, what with us being Japanese, but we were also joined by Sera, who had picked it up as quickly as she picked up everything else. Efil had struggled with them at first, but she had kept at it and was now capable of using them without issue. Gerard and Dahak had also given it a try, but it didn't suit them. Mel knew how to use them, but since she prioritized the speed of getting food into her mouth, her preferred utensil was a spoon.

"So, what was it you wanted to ask me?" Melfina rubbed her eyes.

Is this really too early for her? She still looks so sleepy.

"Well, it's..."

We sat down on the edge of the fountain, and I proceeded to share what Gerard and I had discussed the night before.

“To sum it up,” Melfina said, “an elf who was confirmed dead somehow turned into a dwarf of the same name and reappeared before Gerard and others.”

“Yep, that’s right. So I was wondering if his case might be related to Clive’s transmigration. And I thought, who better to ask than you?”

A long silence followed as Melfina brought a hand to her mouth, indicating that she was thinking. Clotho made a bit of a splash in the water just as she opened her mouth to speak again.

“I did not see the corpse of this elf myself, but I will speak on the assumption that he was indeed truly dead. Normal skills, even Rank S ones, cannot resurrect someone who has died. Black Magic can reanimate corpses, but that is not the same thing as restoring life. Still, it’s hard to be sure with Unique Skills.”

According to Mel, even the deities did not have a complete understanding of Unique Skills, and there were many they did not know of. This was because some appeared spontaneously, one of a kind and suited to the skill owner alone. Not even the gods had the time and resources to check the Statuses of every single living being.

“It is possible someone used the power of reincarnation. I can only think of one individual other than myself who is capable of controlling that power.”

“There *is* someone?!” *Isn’t that a huge issue in and of itself?!*

“It’s Elearis, the previous Goddess of Reincarnation.”

“So the predecessor you mentioned before, who was demoted for being up to no good, was called Elearis?”

“That’s right. Specifically, the Divine Pillars—” Melfina suddenly stopped mid-sentence. Her bewilderment indicated that it had not been a conscious choice.

“Ah, honey. I’m sorry, but it appears I am unable to go into the specifics of what she was trying to do. This matter is deeply involved with the realm of the gods, so the Hidden Skill planted into this artificial body, Divine Binding, is

triggered when I try to talk about it.”

“That skill limits your stats *and* stops you from talking?”

“Well, there are things that would cause a huge uproar if any deity visiting the mortal world accidentally let them slip. I am unable to speak or write the answer to your question. If you could Summon my real body, it would be a different matter.”

“You know as well as I do that it’s beyond me.” *But it would solve so many problems...*

My maximum MP had gone up by a whole digit when I Evolved into a daemon, but it was still insufficient for Summoning a goddess, as Summoning any individuals with a class directly relating to the deities required infinitely more MP than normal creatures. I still came up short.

Little wonder there are no historical accounts of anyone having successfully Summoned a deity.

“Hold on, the name of the previous goddess isn’t considered confidential?”

“It would come up in no time if you were to look through the records at Deramis. After all, they worship me as the Goddess of Reincarnation now, but the target of their worship used to be Elearis.”

Well, that makes sense. Mel did say before that Demon Lord Gustav had been defeated during her predecessor’s time. In other words, it was Elearis who granted the Oracle of the time the Blessing of the Goddess of Reincarnation and urged her to perform the Hero-summoning Ritual. Over time, the target of the Holy Empire’s worship has shifted to Melfina, but it wouldn’t be strange for the name “Elearis” to remain.

“But it is impossible for Elearis to use reincarnation now.”

“Why is that?”

“I should clarify what I said a moment ago: I can only think of one individual other than myself who *was* capable of controlling the power of reincarnation. She is no longer here. I did meet her once after her demotion, and she had definitely lost that ability.”

“Uh...then that brings us back to square one, doesn't it?”

In the end, it's still only Melfina who can use the power of reincarnation, right? Yet Clive was brought over to this world, and it wasn't Melfina who facilitated it. What she's saying is contradictory.

“That is why I believe we can remove Elearis from the list of possible suspects. But instead,” Melfina brought her face close to mine, “I said before that there might be someone who has attained the power of reincarnation, right? My suspicion is that this power was not obtained by accident, but was passed along. For example, what if Elearis transmitted her power to a human who had been waiting to accept it?”

“Is it even possible, passing skills to someone else?”

Mel nodded, falling silent. I gulped nervously and met her gaze. Her eyes, which had seemed on the verge of closing sleepily not long before, were now wide open. I felt like I would fall hopelessly into them if I let my guard down for a split second.

“Of course, I have no conclusive proof. Honestly, I'm not even sure of my theory. After all, there's no precedent for it. What scares me most is *who* the power went to. When speaking of those closest to and most capable of channeling the power of a Goddess of Reincarnation, there are a very limited number of candidates.”

“Closest to and most capable of channeling the power of a Goddess of Reincarnation... Hold on a minute. In your case, wouldn't that be...me?!”

“Oh, very good, honey, very good. You're an exceptional being too. Never before in the history of this world has another Goddess of Reincarnation been proposed to. You're the first. Good job. What a historic achievement. Congratulations.”

“Um, sorry, I saw the chance for a joke and couldn't help myself.”

The way Melfina started clapping with a blank look on her face left me no choice but to apologize. The atmosphere had gotten so serious that I had thrown in the joke before I even knew what I was doing.

But don't think I missed the edge of your mouth climbing up in a little smile,

Melfina!

“So, after limiting the candidates, who do we end up with?”

“Either the Oracle of Deramis who formerly worshipped Elearis, or...”

I suspected that halfway through. Without someone like me in the picture, the closest person to a Goddess of Reincarnation would be the Oracle who receives prophecies and is blessed by the goddess, and can even speak directly to her. Heroes are connected to the goddess in a way, but that’s only for a brief moment when they come over. After the Summoning, they don’t have any opportunity to speak with or meet her, and all communication would have been done through the Oracle. The Heroes don’t receive the goddess’s blessing either.

But even if it was a previous Oracle who summoned Clive, I’m relieved it wasn’t Colette. I shudder to think what someone who worships another deity as fanatically as she does Melfina would do with such power. She could destroy the world while claiming to be saving it.

“Honey, all the Oracles have been zealots, no matter the generation. Colette is a bit more extreme than the others, but the Oracle before her and the one before *her* were also somewhat ill in the head—”

“THE WORLD IS IN DANGER!” *No joke!*

“Of course, what I’m saying is just a conjecture. Take it as one of an infinite number of possibilities. Rather than spending too much time speculating, I think it would be more productive to stay wary about Unique Skills we’ve never heard of and continue our daily training. When you strip everything else away, power is all that matters!”

“So...basically, we do exactly what we’ve been doing?”

“I guess you could put it that way, yes.”

In the end, speculation was exactly that, and all we could do was our best. Sometimes, simple answers were the right answers. The only thing that could oppose absolute power was absolute power.

“Heeeere we go! The Gerard Line is now en route to Dahak Farms! Hang on tight, Ruka and Shutola!”

“Aha ha ha, go, go, go, grandpa!”

“It’s so fast, Ruka-chan! It’s so faaaaast! I’m gonna fall off!”

A dark locomotive carrying two young children passed by us. Or rather, an armored man had run by with two little girls on his shoulders. The sight was alarming, to put it mildly.

Gerard, make sure to never do that outside the grounds of the estate, all right? And if you don’t like that, materialize and take off your armor.

Melfina smiled. “We might be worrying about nothing after all.”

“I sure hope so.”

The sight of a grandfather playing around with his grandchildren had completely taken the tension out of the air.



Everything in the room was pure white, without a single speck of imperfection. It just barely maintained the look of a room with four austere walls on each side, but the distance to those walls seemed vague and indeterminate, almost as if they were mirages. It was both mystical and uncanny.

“I’m back!”

A dark figure clad in a black hood appeared within the pure white space with dance-like steps, looking around.

“Welcome back, Assassin. How did things go?”

A white temple towered in the center of the room. It had the same characteristics as the walls, its form looking as unstable as a fleeting dream. The temple housed a small crib that was impossible to peer into from the outside. The person who had greeted Assassin took three steps forward from the shadow of the temple, revealing silver hair that trailed all the way to the floor. Her face came into view, revealing an expression so filled with compassion and love it was as if she was looking at her own child.

“Pretty good. See?” Assassin took a black book out from the front of her clothes and lifted it up. It floated up and teleported into the silver-haired

woman's hands.

"Thank you. Did working with Creator tire you out? He's been like that since long ago."

"I can't very well refuse when you ask me to do something, now can I? Don't worry about it, Arbitrator. Hm? Are you here alone? Everyone else not being here is normal, but— Oh, there's Protector." She squinted as she looked up at the roof of the temple.

"Nice going, Assassin! You have just overcome destiny!"

A young girl landed softly in front of Assassin. She was wearing a pure white outfit that sharply contrasted the other's, and there was a sword hanging from her waist.

"I have to live up to my alias, don't I? I won't lose to anyone when it comes to detecting presences. Protector, are you always here with Arbitrator?"

"Aha ha ha, to use your words, I have to live up to my alias, right? And Arbitrator and I go waaaay back, although her aura is a bit different now. How long ago was it that a Demon Lord rose and she—"

"Protector, that's enough talk of the past. You speak too much."

The young girl giggled in response to the admonishment and disappeared.

"You have done well, Assassin. You can take your time off, but make sure to keep an eye on your target."

"You got it! Yay for breaks!"

The dark figure left the white space. The only person remaining, Arbitrator, returned to the temple. She laid a hand on the edge of the crib, looking down into it with the expression of a holy mother.



With my blade in hand, I took aim and slashed at the target. Merely flailing wasn't good enough, though. I repeated the motion hundreds—no, thousands of times, striving to make even sharper movements, to be faster, to be more precise. After much trial and error, I finally developed the perfect form. I had arrived at this, the realm of the dei—

“Th-That’s so damn cool! Brother, I *knew* you were special!”

Dahak could not stop gushing with admiration upon seeing my movements—which was only natural, of course, considering what a work of art they were. Any normal person wouldn’t have been able to see them, only the target being cut down without mercy. At the moment, one could even call me a blade of wind personified.

“Brother, please teach me that technique!”

“Hmph. You sure you want to try it? If you attempt this with a half-assed attitude, you’ll only get hurt.”

“My resolve is as firm as Prettia-chan’s abs! I will never give up!”

“A-Ahem. You sure know how to talk big! Very well! Make sure you keep up with my speed!”

“Yes, boss!”

The black dragon in human form followed closely after me, and we kicked things up to another notch of fevered activity. Slow and deliberate teaching was not my style. No, I was a firm subscriber to the idea of students stealing their teachers’ techniques through close observation.

Turn what you see into your flesh and blood, Dahak! Come, test your mettle against me and break through your limits!

“Uh...what’re you guys doing?”

Just as we were about to enter the zone, Sera suddenly called out to us. I turned around and saw her standing there in pajamas and a coat. Although Dahak and I were sweating due to how vigorously we had been moving around, it was quite chilly at this time of day.

“Cutting grass.”

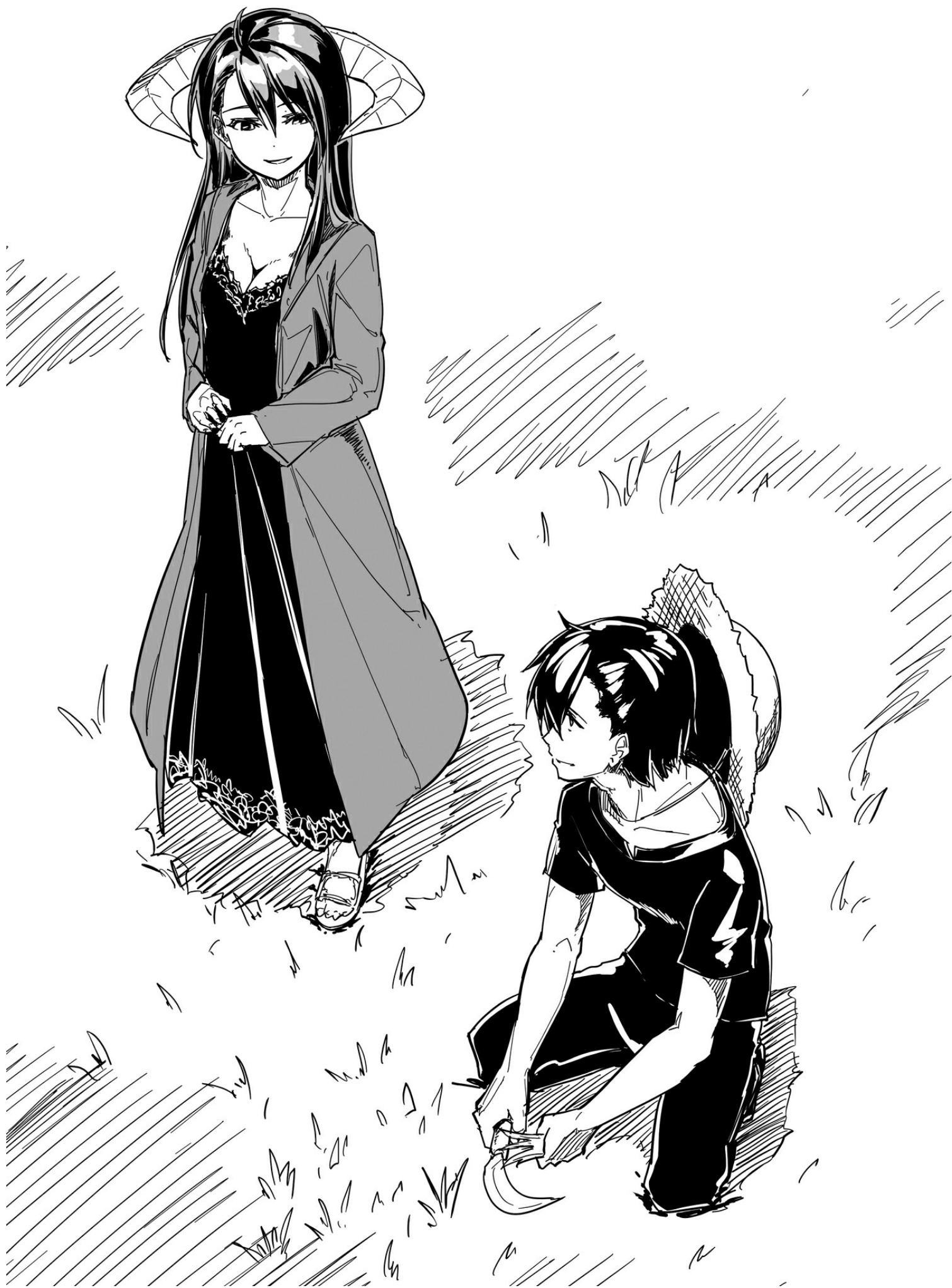
“Cutting grass, sister.”

A solid bout of exercise feels great in the morning.

“Is that something to get *that* enthusiastic about?”

“You’ve *got* to listen to this, sister! Brother’s grass-cutting technique is

absolutely mind-blowing! He goes through the grass as if his scythe is some legendary sword!”



The sun was about to peek over the horizon, and Dahak and I were standing together on his farm, each of us holding a single-handed grass-cutting scythe. We were wearing matching straw hats and had towels slung over our shoulders for the characteristic farmer look. I was surprised to discover that the skill Scythe Mastery was useful for something other than fighting—it seemed so appropriate for grass cutting it was almost as if that had been its original purpose. In any case, it enabled me to mow the grass with movements even more refined than Dahak’s, and he was a master of farming.

I had woken up even earlier than usual and was on my way to the toilet when I’d spotted Dahak up as well at the crack of dawn, hard at work tending to his crops. I’d casually said hi to him and, on a whim, decided to join him in cutting grass. I’d found it much more fun than I had imagined. Before I knew it, I had drawn out the full potential of my Rank S skill, earning Dahak’s profound respect. This caused me to get even more enthusiastic and to even start speaking in a wei—

No, nothing had happened.

“Hmm...I don’t really get it, but it makes sense if it’s Kelvin! Make sure to praise him even more!”

“Of course I will! Brother! I am touched beyond words!”

“S-Sure, thanks...”

Please don’t lay it on any thicker. When it goes this far, it’s going to bring me back to my senses. Actually, I’ll apologize. I’m sorry, I acknowledge I was acting pretty cringey. I’ve got to change the topic ri—

“By the way, sister, why are you out here? Did you need brother for something?”

Nice job, my sworn brother! My evaluation of you has gone up just a bit!

“It’s not that I needed him for anything specific; it’s just that I found him gone when I woke up, so I went looking for him.”

Oh, it’s almost time for Efil to come wake me up. I figured I had to wrap things up soon, but I got so engrossed that I forgot the time.

“And Mel was sleeping on the floor instead of on the bed for some reason, positioned like she was trying to crawl towards the door.”

“On the floor? That’s strange. She moves quite violently when she sleeps, but she’d never fall off the bed.”

“She was repeatedly calling out to you in her sleep. Did you say something to her, Kelvin? It looked like she was trying to chase you.”

Chase me? What did I sa— Wait, is it because of the promise that we would sleep and wake up together at the same time?!

“Oops!”

I didn’t expect her to actually try that hard to keep that promise! Was her unconscious mind trying to push through the sandman’s grip as I left the bed?

“Looks like something was going on there. But don’t worry! I carried her back to bed! Then her expression relaxed and she went on sleeping deeply!” Sera put her hands on her hips and threw her chest out proudly.

Ah, so Mel’s desperation lost out when pitted against the warmth of the bed. But the fact that she tried so hard still makes me super happy.

“Guess I’ve got to make sure I treat Mel to something delicious later.”

“I know, ri— Wait, Mel?! What about me?!”

“Aha ha, don’t worry. Thank you for carrying her back to bed. Is there anything you’d like to do today? If you want, I’ll accompany you.”

“Let’s go to town after breakfast! I don’t get to have you all to myself too often.”

Ah, an invitation for a date. That’s an instant “yes,” of course.

Dahak nodded understandingly. “So, this is a real-life example of the ‘Go on the offensive’ strategy that Prettia-chan taught sister Sera,” he mumbled as he scribbled something into a notebook he had taken out from who-knows-where titled *How to Steal Prettia-chan’s Heart (Top-Secret)*.

I’m definitely not going to take a guess at what he’s writing down.



“So, are there any appropriately exciting dungeons conveniently close by? We’d want one that’s upper Rank A to S. Or a similarly powerful monster that needs subjugating.”

“Sera-san, we went over this last time, did we not? Quests and dungeons at the difficulty you are describing only appear once in a blue moon. In the first place, killing monsters and exploring dungeons are not things you do on a date!”

“But one appeared last time when I asked, didn’t it?”

Sera and Ange argued back and forth over a counter at the guild. Sera and I had wandered around Parth for about an hour when we happened to pass by and decided to drop in to say hi to Ange. I had wanted to pay Rio a visit too, but he was apparently still out of town. Ange, who was in work mode, greeted us with her customary smile. Things had been fine up until this point.

Then, as a natural progression, it had occurred to us to check out what quests were available since we were here and all. When Ange showed us the full list, however...

“The highest-ranked one...is only Rank C,” Sera noted with dissatisfaction. “Are you sure that’s all there is?”

“Yes, Sera-san. Thanks to Kelvin defeating the Demon Lord, the monsters’ aggression levels have returned to normal. What’s more, the Dragon Knight Mercenary Group and the soldiers of the Allied forces already did a sweep of all the dangerous subjugation targets that remained in the vicinity. As a result, the only available quests are those of the usual difficulty for this area.”

“And the usual difficulty for Parth is?”

“Mostly Rank C, with a rare Rank B. As for dungeons, the most dangerous is the Shrine of the Puppets you yourself discovered recently.”

Sera looked at me, so I returned her gaze.

“Um, Kelvin? Sera-san?”

I sighed. “What difficult times we’re living in.”

“I know, right?” Sera agreed, also sighing.

“I, for one, think the peace is great!” Ange retorted.

Sera leaned in close. “Ange, you know you can talk to us, right? Are you really, really sure there isn’t a quest you’re hiding under the counter or something?”

And that was what had led to our current situation. The fact that we had been pretty lucky with quests so far had made it hard for my companion to give up.

“Sera, let’s drop it. Even if there isn’t anything good now, I’m sure something will turn up eventually.”

“But Kelvin, you just Evolved the other day. I want to find you a good opponent to test your new abilities against.”

“I appreciate the intention, but it’s not like I’m in a hurry. Ange, sorry for bothering you when you’re so busy.”

With that, Sera and I turned to leave. Just before we reached the door, Ange ran over and caught up with us.

“Wait a moment, Kelvin! It’s not a quest, but I wanted to let you know about this.”

“Hm?” I looked at the sheet of paper that she had handed me. “A Naming Ceremony in Gaun?”

“Do you remember when I mentioned you can get a family name after being promoted to Rank S? There’s going to be a Naming Ceremony in Gaun soon. It’s a good opportunity. What do you think about joining it?”

Oh, right, there was talk of that before. Everything involving Trycen happened in such quick succession after the promotion ceremony that it entirely slipped my mind.

“I’ve heard you’re already acquainted with the Beast King, right? If there’s a family name that you want to adopt, and you submit the application for it, I’m sure it’ll be approved without issue. In fact, I can even do the application for you if you already have one in mind.”

“Nah, I haven’t given it any thought yet. Can I come to you again when I have something?”

“Of course. There’s still time. Please let me know once you’ve decided.”

I can't very well make a decision like this on my own. Let's get the whole gang together.

"WE'RE IN TROUBLE!"

"IT'S A DISASTER!"

Just as Sera and I were about to head for the door again, it was banged open forcefully. Two adventurers, Heath and Moi, came tumbling inside. For some reason, my companion reacted almost immediately.

"The boss of the Clayworm Passages, the mother clayworm, has woken up!"

"What did you say?! That Rank A monster is awake?!"

The adventurers all around us fell into an uproar.

"Ange, this quest is ours!"

"Huh? Uh, s-sure."

Sera prompted the receptionist to log the quest and promptly grabbed it off her with a practiced hand.

Is this Sera's Luck stat at work again? What is it now? It's already over 2,000, isn't it?



Without further ado, Sera and I went to defeat the mother clayworm by way of a stroll. When we reached Clayworm Passages, we found an especially large branch of the tunnel down in the dungeon. As we proceeded, easily dispatching the monsters of various sizes that we encountered on the way, we came upon one so big that it barely fit between the walls. This was clearly the creature that had been creating new passages—the mother clayworm—so we finished it off in the blink of an eye. As always, I had Clotho retrieve the carcass, just in case some parts turned out useful in the future.

Then the two of us enjoyed our time together, getting back to the house just before lunch. Along the way, we made sure to stop by the guild to report to Ange and claim our reward. I'd probably never forget the faces Heath and Moi, the two adventurers who had first brought back news of the "crisis," made when Sera and I received the money.

And that was it for our date. With our sweet episode over, it was now time to focus on something serious.

“All right, everyone’s here. Guys, I have an important announcement.”

As soon as I got home, I sent out the call for everyone to gather at the dinner table. The others were now in their seats as the five maids—Efil included—stood at attention at the side of the room.

What a moving sight it is having all our maids lined up like this. We only had Efil when I first bought this house, but now there are five of them. Rosalia and Huba are more like temps, but I’m offering extremely generous employee benefits even by Japanese standards, so I hope they’ll continue working for us forever.

::Rawr::

::Grrr!::

Boga and Mdofarak were still within my magic pool, but I considered this full attendance.

“Oh, my king, have you finally decided to begin making arrangements for your wedding?!”

“Seriously?! Congratulations, brother! I *had* thought you and sister Sera seemed closer than usual today! That was the reason why?!”

Gerard and Dahak immediately jumped to some sort of misunderstanding, quickly derailing the conversation. I saw Efil’s ears twitch in response and the smile on Melfina’s face disappeared in a split second. I thought I could hear “*Why haven’t I heard anything about this?*” in my brain even though I could have sworn I hadn’t received any telepathic messages.

I could tell the conversation was on the fast track to pandemonium. Although I had gotten permission from Efil, Sera, and Melfina to date all of them concurrently, marriage was a whole other ballgame. Allowing anyone to steal a march on the others was a reprehensible act that was utterly unforgivable. And even if Efil forgave it, a goddess wouldn’t.

Sera just looked confused. Her head was tilted and her brows were knitted

together as if she was trying to recall whether she had heard anything about it.

“Rosalia, can you stop emanating cold air? I’m getting goosebumps,” Huba complained.

“It is not me. This is... Read the room, all right?” Rosalia replied.

“Rosalia, Rosalia! Who and who are getting married?” Shutola asked, tugging on the older maid’s sleeve.

Hey, Trycen trio over there, can you not?! The room is getting colder and colder!

“Ahem. Don’t misunderstand. I am talking about an entirely different matter.”

I took great care to enunciate properly and speak clearly as I denied the allegation. I was so nervous that my voice almost cracked, but Nerves of Steel saw me through yet another one of my predicaments.

“Aha ha, Gramps and Hak-chan are both too impatient! When Kel-nii marries, of course he’ll be marrying everyone all at once!” Rion said, backing me up. The wink she sent me made me feel more reassured than I had ever felt.

I couldn’t have asked for a better little sister! Your kindness is almost enough to make me tear up!

Clearly, I wasn’t the only one who had derived reassurance from Rion’s words. Efil’s ears settled back down as Melfina reddened with the realization that she had leaped to conclusions. The crisis had been successfully averted.

“So, what’s *actually* happening is...”

I proceeded to share the news of the upcoming Naming Ceremony that would be happening in Gaun and explained how it led to the need for me to decide on a family name.

“Oh right, there *was* that perk to being a Rank S adventurer. Do you already have a few candidates in mind, honey?”

“I’m afraid I’m drawing a complete blank. That’s why I gathered all of you. I was hoping that by putting our heads together, we could come up with something good. I want the staff’s input too, so don’t worry about your station or whatever and feel free to speak up if anything comes to mind.”

I was well aware that I had a terrible sense for names—even I had no idea how I'd managed to come up with “Clotho” at the start. I knew a bit about Japanese names, but most names in this world fell under the Western category back on Earth. What's more, my last name would become Rion's and, in the future, Mel, Sera, and Efil's last name. It would be too hasty for me to just decide on something arbitrarily. That was why I wanted to properly consult everyone. I even took out a blackboard from Clotho's Storage and had Efil, who had beautiful handwriting, serve as secretary.

Dahak crossed his arms. “Family name, huh? We dragons don't really have that custom.”

“It's hard to come up with something good when you get down to it,” Melfina commented. “If this was for a dish, I could come up with a name in a split second, but it's not quite the same thing.”

The point was to pool our ideas, but nothing was occurring to anyone. I wondered if this was how parents felt when deciding on names for their children. Although the nuances were probably different, I was sure that the level of difficulty was the same.

Suddenly, someone raised their hand. “May I, my king?”

It was Gerard, and he seemed strangely confident.

Oh, with all his life experience, I'm sure he can come up with something good! My expectations are climbing!

“How about Magosky?”

“What am I, a Russian?! That's a name based on *your* preference!” *And why'd you say that in the most suave voice you could manage?! I guess a suggestion's a suggestion, though.* “Might as well put it on the board, Efil.”

“Pfffffft! Honey...as a R-Russian!”

Melfina was having a heck of a time trying to hold in her laughter. Apparently, my retort had struck her as funny. Of course, no one but Melfina and Rion had any idea what a Russian was. Honestly, it was a mystery to me whether the joke was *that* funny even for those who understood it.

“Kelvin! Me, me!”

“Yes, Sera!”

“How about Bahl? Bahl is a family name with an ancient and honorable origin where I’m from!”

“Hmm, Bahl. Bahl. Please put that on the board too, Efil.”

“Yes, Master.”

I was worried that starting off with Gerard’s “Magosky” would set us off on a streak of weird names, so I heaved a sigh of relief at hearing a proper suggestion. *Speaking of which, I wonder what Sera’s homeland is like?*

“Oh, Master! I just thought of one!”

It was as if Sera’s “Bahl” had been a trigger that unlocked the floodgates. Various suggestions came in one after another. As the saying went, two heads were better than one, and we had many, many heads here. We ended up with so many ideas that there was no more space on the board. Then we took a vote.

“I have finished tallying the votes. I will now announce the winner.”

Efil, who had changed jobs from secretary to teller, stood in front of us with a single piece of paper in her hand. Our normally boisterous dining hall fell silent, with everyone hanging on her words with bated breath.

“Going forward, Master and Rion-sama’s honorable family name will be, with eight votes, Rion-sama’s suggestion of ‘Celsius’!”

Cheers and applause erupted. *So, it was Rion’s idea that won! Well, I did vote for it too. I mean, it sounds cool, doesn’t it? Kelvin Celsius and Rion Celsius... Yep, I love the sound of it!*

“Well then, can we have a word from the person who came up with it? Congratulations, Rion-sama. What inspired you to think of this name?”

“Umm...thank you? I was reflecting on Kel-nii’s name when it just came to me.”

“I see, so this name is imbued with love for your brother!” Mel wiped a tear

from her eye. “That’s so moving!”

Your feelings have touched me, Rion. May I cry now? I think I’m going to cry.

Rion scratched her head, looking somewhat unsure. “Umm...you know, I was sort of kidding... Are we seriously going with this?”



After we settled on my new family name, I promptly headed to the Adventurer’s Guild to inform Ange. I knew I had to wait for the Naming Ceremony to be over before I could officially use the new name and that there was still quite a bit of time until the ceremony. However, I wasn’t in any particular rush, especially in light of the fact that I could travel to Gaun in an instant through the teleportation gate. So my companions and I decided to use the time to upgrade our equipment, check out our new abilities, and so on. A few of us were now gathering in the training hall beneath our house to do the latter.

“It’s so big here underground! It’s even bigger than dear brother’s house. I might get lost.”

“I do admit I went too far with the expansion. It’s pretty much a labyrinth at this point. Make sure to be careful, all right, Shutola?”

“No, don’t say that! I have a good memory! I can remember all the roads!”

I opened the heavy doors to the training hall, pulling Shutola’s hand. To anyone surprised by us already having become so close, I remind you that we were housemates living under the same roof. Having her avoid me all the time would have taken a severe toll on my mental health, so I made a conscious effort to build a relationship with the little princess. Thanks to that, we had recently gotten close enough for her to call me “dear brother,” and we treated each other as friends. Apparently, she was the kind of person who opened her heart all the way once she let someone in.

Of course, this had required a fair amount of effort and sacrifice on my part, the most prominent examples being when I gave her snacks that Efil had made for me and when I helped her hide from Rosalia, who was in charge of tutoring her. Azgrad had warned me before that she was shy with strangers, but I had

not expected winning her over to be harder than defeating a Rank S monster. Somewhere along the way, Huba had started giving me weird looks, though. I would bet she was laboring under some terrible misunderstanding.

“Well then, today is for exploring the new skills that Rion, Efil, Gerard, and I acquired during our Evolutions. I’m sure everyone’s already tried using them on their own, right?”

I had issued a blanket order forbidding the use of any of our new skills during practice matches until now. After all, it was far too risky using them on each other without first understanding their effects. Although everyone had access to their own Status and could read the description that came with each skill, there were finer details that required actually using the skill to understand.

“My king, are we doing this ‘testing’ today in a real match? Since we are talking about Unique Skills here, would that not be dangerous?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve really given it serious thought. See, it doesn’t really matter what our target is as long as we have *a* target. Sera, take it away.”

“All right. Ah, Shutola, stay back; it’s dangerous. Actually, Dahak, it’s your duty to protect Shutola. You hear me?”

“I’m not sure what this is all about, but you got it, sister Sera! Come on, girly. Here, I’ll give you these vegetable sticks that sister Efil made for easy snacking, so stay close to me.”

Dahak took out a circular container filled with vegetable sticks in a large array of vivid colors and held it out to Shutola. The container was so fancy that it emitted cold air, which meant it had likely been made by Melfina.

How does Dahak manage to look like a delinquent offering a little girl a cigarette?

Shutola’s eyes lit up. “Efil made them?! I want some!” she cried, immediately reaching to take one. Even this princess, who had been brought up in a royal palace, found Efil’s food irresistible. “It’s so goood!”

“Course it is. It’s sister Efil’s food.”

The two of them proceeded to stuff their cheeks, with Dahak sitting cross-

legged on the ground and Shutola on his lap. Despite his appearance and mannerisms, for some strange reason, children really liked the dragon.

Do you even know how hard it was for me to get Shutola to open up?! Huh?! Hmph, I can only hope that that strange ability of yours works on the person you're actually pursuing!

"Come on out, mother bloodworm!"

Sera's shadow seemed to explode as a giant red form rushed out with incredible momentum, reaching so high that it almost touched the ceiling.

Rion tilted her head quizzically. "Wait, isn't this—"

"Yep, Sera basically used her Black Magic to resurrect the mother clayworm we killed the other day," I confirmed. "What's more, it's got Sera's blood in its body, so it's pretty strong now. We won't get any XP for killing it again, but it should serve as a good opponent to test our new skills against."

"I'm not really controlling it or anything, so it'll just fight on instinct. What we're aiming for is a realistic battle, after all!" Sera announced, glancing at me. The tail of the creature rushed towards her in a mowing attack, but she stopped it with a single hand. "See? Dangerous."

Um, you sure don't make it look dangerous, Ms. I Can Stop It With One Hand. That said, it's true that the mother clayworm—now a mother bloodworm—is very likely to be classified as a Rank S monster if the guild were to evaluate it. Overall, it's even more powerful than the evil dragon in Dragon Sea Cave. Yep, Sera did a good job. It's still weak enough that she can stop its attack with a single hand, though.

"If this is a reanimated corpse, I should probably go last," Rion suggested.

Gerard stepped up. "Then I shall go first. My new skills aren't so much 'new' as they are upgrades to the ones I had before..."



"Nope, it's not working. Kelvin, this clayworm can't be resurrected anymore."

"Hmm, if even you can't manage it with your Rank S skill, I think it's safe to say it's categorically impossible."

“That last attack from Rion really finished it off. It’s been completely purified.”

“Aha ha ha... Sorry.”

The order in which we each fought the mother bloodworm was: Gerard, Efil, me, and then Rion. After every match, it had been reduced to an absolutely tragic state. Gerard had diced it up, Efil had incinerated it, I had also sliced it into pieces, and, in the end, Rion had straight up helped it pass on...although technically, it had already “passed on” the first time Sera and I killed it.

“In any case, it seems we’ve largely seen everything our new skills can do.”

Let’s go over Gerard’s skills first. His two new Unique Skills, Glory Within Mine Hands and Self-Transcendence, were, as he had said, upgraded versions of the two he had previously owned: Loyalty and Self-Modification. Gerard had already given us a general explanation of Self-Transcendence, and there wasn’t really much else to add. Its effects were pretty straightforward.

Glory Within Mine Hands was sort of like Loyalty but without the drawbacks. Loyalty buffed Gerard’s skills for a certain period of time but then rendered him immobile for a while afterwards. In contrast, Glory Within Mine Hands had no such lingering debuffs. What’s more, the duration of the effect increased with every enemy defeated. He’d had to use the skill tactically and carefully before, but now he could use it without holding back. The only issue was how much loyalty Gerard actually felt towards me.

I sure don’t feel that loyalty in the way he’s always messing with me. Are we okay here?

“As for Efil, your skill basically turns your flames blue.”

“Yes, Master. I can now generate blue flames,” Efil responded, summoning a small ball of fire in the palm of her hand.

Shutola leaned forward. “It’s so pretty.”

“It’s a lot more dangerous than it looks, so don’t ever try to touch it, all right?” I warned her.

“You heard him. Back off, girlye.”

Since Dahak was keeping an eye on Shutola and holding her back where

necessary—although he got a pout and an indignant “Mrrm!” for his troubles—I didn’t pursue the matter.

Just as its name implied, Efil’s new Unique Skill, Blue Flame, turned her fire blue. Of course, that was not the full extent of its effect. The blue flames were significantly more powerful than the orange ones and were much more MP-efficient. According to the description that she read aloud from her Status screen, these flames could even penetrate any resistance her opponents had against fire-elemental damage. In short, the rate at which she could dish out damage had just gotten a massive boost. Since she could freely switch between the two, it was likely going to become a very effective ace up her sleeve.

“By the way, what does your other skill do? I don’t think I saw you use it during your match just now.”

“I believe Divine Restitution is a skill that raises my Luck stat. It should be similar in function to Super Luck, which Sera-san possesses.”

“Damn, the buff from yours is more than double hers, and hers is already at Rank S.”

At Rank S, Super Luck gave Sera a boost of +640 in Luck. In contrast, Efil’s Unique Skill gave her +1,437. It was astounding, to put it mildly.

There’s gotta be something else about the skill too. The name seems to be hinting at it.

“Um, I don’t think I see anything else in the desc—” Efil, who had been scrolling down the description panel, suddenly let out a small “Oh!” before continuing. “Um, after many, many blank lines, there is one line at the very bottom that says, ‘The amount of correction to the stat is proportional to the amount of misfortune previously experienced by the owner of this skill.’”

The rest of us found ourselves at a loss for what to say. *The atmosphere’s so heavy!*

“Master, there is no need to make that face. I am extremely happy now. What I have received since I met you has been more than enough to write off—no, it has been severalfold what it would take to balance out everything I suffered before. All I want from you, Master, is your usual wonderful smile.”

“Efil...”

Why am I surrounded by such angels in this life?! If I don't make all of them happy, I'm probably going to get struck down by divine punishment!

“Lass, when you say ‘wonderful smile,’ are you perhaps referring to...”

Efil tilted her head as if failing to understand what Gerard meant. “All of Master’s smiles are wonderful.”

“Uhhh... Sure, yes, of course. I don’t know what came over me. Please continue, my king.”

What was he thinking of? Oh well, never mind. “Rion’s Absolute Purification also seems to be exactly what it sounds like. It’s rendered the mother bloodworm impossible to resurrect again.”

“Mh-hm! I think this is going to be quite effective against Black Magic in general. Judging from how it feels, I think I can purify most undead monsters with a single tap. The description does mention cleansing grudges and poisons. Oh, and it’s really powerful against curses! I tried using one of the cursed weapons in Clotho’s Storage, but the curse disappeared the second I touched it.”

Even her Unique Skill is saintly. Considering the MP she still has left, it’s also a completely passive skill that doesn’t cost anything to use. I guess it’s more of a physical constitution thing, then. And Clotho, don’t be giving Rion dangerous things like that just because she asks for them.

“Sounds like it’s a skill that’s perfect for you, Rion. But don’t push yourself too hard, all right?”

“Ehe he he, you don’t have to remind me, Kel-nii!”

I couldn’t stop rubbing her head—not that I had any need to, though. I could praise Rion all day long, and it wouldn’t be enough.

Dahak finally spoke up. “How about you, brother? What do your new skills do?”

“Oh, mine? Well, they...”

Chapter 2: Company Trip

Several days passed, with the day of the Naming Ceremony in Gaun gradually drawing close. The last time we were in Gaun was when we defended the Village of Elves from a Trycenian invasion. Since we had returned to Parth directly from the Forest of Crests, it was going to be our first time visiting the beastkin's capital. After our experience in the Village of Elves, I was expecting the city to be overflowing with greenery. My guidebook had said so too.

"What's this? Are you lot heading off to Gaun tomorrow already? Didn't you just get home?" Clare asked.

"I mean, yes, we're heading off, but technically, it's just a matter of stepping through the teleportation gate. If anything happens, we can come back immediately. While we're there, we'll try to see as many of the sights as we can. Oh, right, what would you like as a souvenir?"

"Oh gosh, you don't have to go out of your way. But since Gaun has a large number of adventurers and hunters, it's famous for its large variety of meat. It'd make me happy if you could bring back something rare that catches Efil-chan's attention."

"Rare meat," Efil repeated pensively before giving a firm nod. "I shall do my best."

At the moment, Efil and I were at the Fairy's Song with Ruka, who was off the clock. We had come to inform Clare that we would be gone again from tomorrow. We had purposely chosen to stop by between the lunch and the dinner rush, so there was only a smattering of customers.

And in a lucky coincidence, Uld, who was normally out adventuring, also happened to be in just then. He chuckled, "There's no need to stress yourself over it too much. We'd be happy with whatever Efil chooses!"

"Gosh, honey, would it kill you to give a more serious answer?" Clare sighed before turning to us and shrugging. "Although in this case, he's right."

Today was apparently Uld's day off, and he was already downing mugs of ale even though it was still daytime. While he had finished off quite a few mugs already, he could hold his drink as well as Gerard. I felt like he was slightly cheerier than usual, but his face looked sober.

"Awww, everyone's heading out again," Ruka sighed despondently after taking a sip of the juice Clare had served her from behind the counter. "Master, when will you come home this time?"

"Unless something major happens at the house, probably a few w— Oh, I see. It'll just be you and Ellie alone in the house again, huh?"

Ruka's dejected face prompted me to consider her thought process. We would naturally have to bring Shutola along with us, as she was under my charge. That being the case, Rosalia and Huba, who were remaining with us as maids in order to serve as the princess's guards, would be coming as well. That would leave only Ruka and Ellie in the house with a large number of golems. Considering Ruka and Shutola had only just gotten close enough to play together, it was perhaps a bit too cruel for Ruka, who was still young and energetic.

"Ruka, I understand how you feel, but—" Efil began before I cut her off.

"Well, no, hold on. I imagine it's hard for them to find meaning in their work if the people they're supposed to serve are always away. And everyone needs a breather once in a while."

"So you're saying..."

I racked my brain for a suitable excuse to get Ellie and Ruka out of the house and bring them along. *Come on, Parallel Processing! Do your thing!*

Parallel Processing was originally a Unique Skill belonging to Miyabi, one of the Heroes of Deramis. I had previously been using it as a copied skill through my gauntlets, Skill Eater, but when I Evolved into a daemon, it had been added as my own Unique Skill. I wasn't sure of the specific mechanics behind how that had happened, but what I did know was that I could now freely use both sides of Skill Eater to copy other abilities, which had greatly expanded the breadth of what I could do in battle.

“Right! Let’s make this a company trip!”

“Company?”

“Trip?”

While one of my trains of thought was buying time thinking about unrelated things, another one came up with exactly what I needed.

“That’s right! Well, in our case, we’d call it a ‘party trip,’ I guess. We have the golems looking after the house, so it shouldn’t be a problem to leave it otherwise empty for a few weeks. Showing people that you appreciate their work now and then is an important part of being an employer! Yep!”

Ruka leaped out of her chair. “Really?! Can I really come along?!”



“Are you sure about this, Master?”

“It’s a brilliant idea, if I do say so myself. It’d make me look more reputable having servants accompany me at the Naming Ceremony, wouldn’t it?”

Not that I know what the ceremony involves. Ange hasn’t actually explained it in detail yet. But oh well, I’m sure we’ll manage. And in this case, the Naming Ceremony itself is more like an aside, really.

“Yaaaaay! Oh, I’ve got to let mommy know! There are so many things I need to bring along. Shutola-chan can’t sleep without her plushies, so... Master, I’m heading home first!”

“All right, just be ca— Aaaand she’s already gone.”

Looks like Experience Sharing is doing wonders for making her stronger. Or, more accurately, making her faster.

“Uh, did I just imagine it or did Ruka-chan disappear in the blink of an eye?” Uld asked, rubbing his eyes as if he was tired. “That’s just strange. Have I drunk too much?”

“What nonsense are you talking?” Clare scolded him. “All right, that’s enough drink for you today. You should start thinking about your age!”

“I-I suppose so. I do have an early day tomorrow too.”

Since Clare had been washing the dishes and had her back turned, she hadn’t seen Ruka take off. Our young apprentice maid had already surpassed the abilities of Uld, a Rank B adventurer. I had heard that she’d even been able to fire off a few flying slashes during her practice with Gerard lately.

What a reliable maid she’s becoming. Maybe it’s about time to stop calling her an apprentice.

“Thank you, Master. I should have paid more attention to them, being the head maid. I believe Ellie will be very happy about this as well.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m only doing this because I want to. And I’m sure this way, it’d be more fun for Rion and Shutola.”

Efil giggled. “I can already imagine them playing together.”

Now that things are set, I've got to get serious about planning our itinerary. I've already gathered information on tourist attractions and restaurants in the capital, but Sera and Mel keep going back and forth, so we haven't finalized anything yet. There's a ton to think about even just regarding food, with some considerations being the fact that Dahak doesn't eat meat and Mdofarak's insistence on sweet pastries. Should I just give up and schedule everything as free time? Hmm, but I can't stop worrying about Boga and Mdo, both of whom only just learned how to transform into human form...

"I'm not sure I follow, but you look like you're thinking hard about something, Kelvin," Uld commented.

"Clare-san, Uld-san, it's about time for us to head out."

"You're already taking off, Kel-chan?"

"I've got things I need to go over. I hope you're looking forward to your souvenirs!"

"Just bring back whatever. I'll cook it up real nice for you to enjoy!"

"Uh, then whose souvenir does that become? But if that's the case, I'm gonna have to rely on Efil to pick out something good!"

"Ha ha ha! So you will!"

After exchanging a few more laughs, Efil and I left the Fairy's Song. We did some quick shopping, then returned home.

"Uh...Efil, I think I see a suit of armor similar to the Hades Knight King in front of our home. Am I just imagining it?"

"No, Master. That is indeed Gerard-san."

There was a huge figure crouched between the golems on guard, Two and Three. I got the feeling that even they felt somewhat troubled by the situation.

"Gerard, what are you doing here? You're blocki—"

"MY KING! O MY KING!" Gerard cried, falling to one knee. "Is it true that Ruka is joining us on our trip?! I shall serve you with all my heart for as long as I live!"

I thought I could perceptibly feel his loyalty to me climbing.

Dude, how ecstatic are you about this?!



On the day of our departure, Ange once again led us to the teleportation chamber beneath the Adventurer's Guild. I'd wanted to say hi to Rio before we went through, but he had yet to come back after everything that had happened in Trycen. According to Ange, his work mediating between the different nations was taking longer than expected.

I guess being guildmaster just comes with a busy schedule.

"It's a bit late to ask this, but nobody forgot anything, right?"

Ruka's arms shot up into the air. "Everything's inside Clotho's Storage, so we couldn't forget even if we wanted to, Master!"

What, are you making it a point to show me that you aren't carrying anything? Well, neither am I, and neither is anyone else in our group. Part of the fun of traveling is having bags that grow in size in proportion to how long the trip is, but it's an entirely different matter with Clotho here. The capacity of Rank S Storage is, for all we know, limitless, and even has perfect sorting capabilities.

"I have my teddy bear!" Shutola cried, holding a plushie aloft. The one she had chosen for today had brown fur and an orthodox design.

All right, now Shutola is guaranteed to sleep well!

"Your group just keeps getting larger and larger," Ange noted as she looked at the crowd of people chattering excitedly about the plans they had for the trip.

It's true it was just Melfina and me at the start. Then Clotho joined us, I Contracted with Gerard...and it's actually gotten really lively now.

"Even I can hardly believe it. And, uh...why're you wearing casual wear and not your uniform? Aren't you on the clock right now?"

For some reason, Ange was also shouldering a large bag. In fact, she looked more like someone going on a trip than I did.

"What? Didn't I mention it? I'm coming along too, as the representative of the Parth Adventurer's Guild. And since no one will know me in Gaun, I'm in off-duty mode! Though...I might have to split up with you guys for work every once

in a while.”

“You never mentioned it. You should have told me earlier!”

Having more people along is a welcome surprise, though. I hope this serves as a good opportunity for her to get close to Shutola too.

“Aha ha ha, sorry, sorry. But that’s how it is, so rest assured you’re in good hands for the Naming Ceremony!”

She waved her hand as if to dismiss the topic and headed for the panel in front of the teleportation gate. Along the way, she muttered under her breath, “With this many lovers around, it wouldn’t be a problem if I tried to blend in with them, right? In fact, it’d seem more natural, right? Ange, you got this!”

I guess having good hearing has its downsides too. I end up picking up things people say without meaning to. I never knew she wanted to go on a vacation this badly. Maybe I should take the initiative to invite her on our next one.



When the light from the teleportation gate faded, we found ourselves in a mid-sized room that appeared to be inside a tree, with muscular beastkin guards lining the walls. Most prominent, of course, was Goma, who was standing right in front of the gate in a dress. She bowed regally.

“We have been waiting for you, Kelvin-sama. On behalf of all Gaun, I welcome you and your companions.”

I know she’s a princess, but I got so used to seeing her in adventurers’ garb that this is actually quite refreshing.

“It’s been a while, Goma. Or should I call you ‘Your Highness’?”

The princess giggled, “Oh, please just call me ‘Goma’ as you have been doing, Kelvin-sama.” Suddenly, her elegant demeanor melted away as she leaned forward and stuck her tongue out in a cheeky way. Since she was wearing a dress, this posture caused the upper part of her chest to be revealed.

As a guy, I have to stare, right? But wait...am I just imagining it or is she sexier than before?

::Kel-nii, she feels kind of different from Goma-san, doesn’t she?::

What a coincidence, sister dear. I was just thinking the same thing.

Apparently, even Rion felt something was off with this Goma. As we exchanged comments over the Network, a loud pounding that shook the floor could be heard approaching the room at high speed.

“FAAATHEEEEEERRRRR!”

The epicenter of the quaking burst into the room. This was the Goma we knew. Her outfit was not adventuring attire, sure, but it did look like royal attire pared down as much as possible. Now we were staring at two identical Gomas. They even had the exact same Status, according to Analyze Eye.

I finally understood what was going on thanks to that cry of rage, quickly recalling the incredible magic item that the Beast King owned and frequently used.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Goma’s fist of fury flew forward, boosted with the momentum of her charge. When I saw it, I knew without a doubt that she was the real one. Her punching form was as beautiful as ever, with the fist coming directly from the hip. This was the same fist that had destroyed many a Sabat—

Bam.

Goma’s supposedly unstoppable fist was stopped. What’s more, it was halted by a single hand, with the force of her attack being entirely neutralized. Leonhart even went to the trouble of flashing his underwear for a split second at an angle that only I could have seen. The fact that he managed to move so agilely despite wearing a dress spoke volumes about how frightful he would be in battle.

“Oh no, my body double is rebelling against me!”

“‘Rebelling’?! How can you just... In this case, *you’re* the body double, father! Argh, this is so wrong!”

“Heh heh heh, it’s your own fault for being late.”

“Shut it! Sabato and I made sure we were ready. You’re the one who gave us the wrong time!”

The fists kept flying even as the verbal tête-à-tête went on. At this point, the rest of my companions had also caught on. The guards who were there to protect the royal family remained stock-still with looks of “This again?” on their faces.

“Um, Beast King. We kind of already understand what’s going on, so can we move the conversation along?”

“Oh, you’ve already seen through my disguise? That’s a Rank S adventurer for you.”

The moment that Goma-in-a-dress—more correctly, the Beast King—turned towards me with an impressed expression, he also speedily put some distance between himself and the real Goma. The latter dropped her fists, understanding that any further attacks were futile, and approached us as well.

“Everyone, I’m terribly sorry, but please pretend you did not see the other version of me just now. In fact, please erase it from your memories, if possible.”

“S-Sure...”

Goma’s face was red with embarrassment. The national treasure that the Beast King used enabled him to perfectly disguise himself as someone else. Even though he was Leonhart on the inside, his physical appearance was a flawless replication of his daughter. In other words, the flashes of her cleavage and underwear that he’d shown were exactly the same as those of the real person.

Rest assured, Goma. I have properly burned your gallant figure into my brain.

“Goma, why can’t you act a bit more ladylike?” Leonhart asked, looking disappointed. “Look at how ladylike Kelvin’s wives are. The difference between you and them is like night and day.”

“Says the person who educates his children by throwing them into dungeons!”

“Oh, so nostalgic! I lost count of how many times you and Sabato came back out carrying Kilto on your shoulders after I threw the three of you inside together. If only Kilto had picked up a fraction of that valo—”

“Ummm...”

Although the topic sounded very interesting, it didn't seem like it would end anytime soon, so I forcibly redirected things.

“Ah, you have my apologies once again,” the king replied. “I just can't seem to stop when talking about my children. This room here is within the Castle of the Divine Spirit Tree, the greatest tree in the country of Gaun. As such, there are no windows anywhere. I shall show you our prided capital city. Come with me.”

Goma sighed. “Kelvin-san, my father's been extremely excited about showing you and your friends around ever since yesterday. I'm sorry, but can you play along?”

“It would be our honor. That said, um...how long is he going to stay in that form?”

“Even I haven't seen his real appearance in years, and I'm his daughter. I hate it, but I think he intends to stick with that appearance for the rest of the day. Generally, he switches once a day.”

“Sounds like I have to stay on my toes.”

“You really do!” Goma replied emphatically.

So, the Beast King has been training Sabato and Goma this way ever since they were young? Little wonder the two of them are so powerful in both body and mind.

“Come oooooon! If you drag your feet any longer, I'm gonna share one of Goma's secrets with Kildo!”

“Kelvin-san, please hurry!”

I can see how Goma and Sabato might prefer the open road to being home.



“Wow, so incredible!”

“What a wonderful view!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! I know, right?!”

The place that the Beast King guided us to was a platform close to the top of

the Divine Spirit Tree. It was so high up that the clouds above seemed within arm's reach, and the entire capital was spread out below us.

It was a city filled with greenery, with every building erected in such a way that it left as small of an environmental footprint as possible. Just like this castle, many of the houses were built into trees. The abundance of these constructions made me feel *"Ah, now this is a fantasy world!"* more than anywhere else I had been so far. On the other hand, there were also more conventional-looking houses in a few wide-open spaces. Clearly, their architectural differences were based on the terrain being built on.

"What's that large structure over there?" Sera asked curiously. "Efil, can you see it?"

"It is a circular arena that looks like a coliseum. There are two men who appear to be Warriors fighting inside at the moment."

"Oh, right, wasn't there a professional announcer from Gaun who commentated on my exhibition match with Sylvia? If I remember correctly, it was 'Ronove from the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena.'"

As I recall, it was also the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena that lent the magic item that served as a loudspeaker. Ugh, and a sound I never want to think about again just came to mind. I won't say what sound it is, though. Don't say it.

"Indeed! The arena is our pride and joy," Leonhart confirmed. "Many of our citizens are rather hot-blooded, you see. I can't say it that well, but basically, if they don't get the opportunity to indulge their wild nature as beastkin every once in a while, it builds up. The fighting arena is the best place to fulfill that thirst and give the more powerful among us a place to test their mettle."

"Sounds interesting."

Of course, I had done my research on the arena ahead of time. The term "coliseum" might cause people to think of gladiators, slaves who had to fight to the death as a source of entertainment for others. However, that was not how Gaun's arena was run. Rather, it was a place where soldiers and warriors gathered at regular intervals for tournaments. Social status and past achievements meant nothing—the general attitude towards them was "Go ahead and join if you're confident in your fighting prowess! It's your own

responsibility if you die!”

In spite of the unreasonable requirements for participation, however, the flow of applicants proved unending.

Not that I can say much about others; if anything, I’m just like them. Honestly, the arena is the place I’m looking forward to seeing most. And hey, who knows, maybe I could participate somehow?

“Heh heh, the profit we’re raking in from sightseers is...one...two...three...”

“Father, please stop smirking and fiddling with your abacus while looking like me.”

I’ve had this thought before, but the Beast King is a serious weirdo, isn’t he? Maybe it’s just my prejudice, but I expected the king of all beastkin to be a simpleminded guy with a straightforward personality who prefers fighting head-on. Like Sabato, for instance. But the first time I met Leonhart, he’d disguised himself as the daughter of the Elder of the Village of Elves, and now he’s calculating something with an abacus and grinning evilly. Um, where did he pull that abacus from in the first place? And dude, this world actually has the abacus as an invention, huh? Look at the way his fingers are flitting over it. Even I can’t move that fast. All things considered, Beast King Leonhart Gaun really is a distinctive individual. As much as Prettia is, I would say. Are all Rank S adventurers beyond saving?

“By the way, Kelvin, the Naming Ceremony will be held in the coliseum too. Make sure to remember its general location,” Ange offered.

“Oh, it’s in the coliseum? Gotcha.” *The ceremony for Naming is held inside a fighting arena? I guess you can say it’s just like the Gaunians to do something like that. Do they also consider this a form of entertainment, by any chance?*

“Damn, fighting in an arena sounds like fun,” Dahak said somewhat enviously. “I want to see how much stronger I’ve gotten!”

“Haven’t you been losing to Boga more and more in practice recently?” Sera asked.

“S-Sister, you promised to keep that a secret! And that’s because we were fighting without usi—”

Gerard cleared his throat. “Being a poor loser isn’t manly, Dahak. You *have* been paying a bit too much attention to your fields and love life recently. Make sure to make time for training.”

“Make time for training!” Ruka repeated.

Dahak could not manage anything more than a groan in response, showing that he was at least aware of the issue. It was true that Boga had spent almost every day recently receiving instruction from Gerard, so it was clear who would win when going head-to-head.

“Did I hear that right? Are all of you interested in fighting in the arena? What a coincidence. There just happens to be a major tournament five days from now. I suppose...”

Of course, I did not miss the crooked smile that had come over the Beast King’s—well, Goma’s—face.



“Where...are we?”

The Beast King guided us outside the castle. A large number of Gaunian soldiers were furiously exchanging blows using practice swords, sweat glistening on their skin. By all appearances, it was a training ground.

“There are some who might protest your participation until they see you in action. Wait here,” Leonhart said before walking off towards a lion-like beastkin with a splendid mane who was watching the others with his arms crossed. This man, clearly an instructor, immediately grew flustered upon seeing Goma-in-a-dress and saluted stiffly.

Any way you cut it, the guy looks more like a “Beast King,” right?

“That is Jereol, my eldest brother and the one who taught me how to fight,” Goma explained. “He’s said to be the second strongest in all of Gaun, but he can never say no to his wife, Risa-san. That said, the two of them are desperately in love and nigh inseparable.”

Hmm, the second strongest. Definitely gonna have to look into him later.

“Oh, hey, it’s Kelvin! You’re already here?!” a loud voice shouted from among

the soldiers training. “I was just thinking it was time I went to get you!”

To my surprise, when my companions and I turned around, we saw Sabato rushing our way.

I raised a hand in greeting. “Hey there, Sabato. Hold on...if both you and Goma are here in the castle, does that mean you’re taking a break from being an adventurer? Or are you back to being royalty?”

“We’re not done being adventurers. It’s just that after everything that happened with the Demon Lord, our old man is allowing us a chance to take on the Gaun name at the coming Naming Ceremony. I’m warming up for it right now.”

“A chance?”

Goma took it upon herself to clarify. “Once every year, there’s a Beast King Festival, and it’s held right before a Naming Ceremony. That’s the ‘major tournament five days later’ my father just mentioned. The Naming Ceremony is held twice every year, just as it is in all the other countries, but this is the only one where members of the royal family can be granted the royal family name. To qualify for the honor, we both have to have produced tangible results during our journeys and prove our strength before the Beast King. Only then do we have the right to add ‘Gaun’ to our names. We don’t actually have to win the tournament, but we do have to at least show that we aren’t pushovers. That’s why I’ve been sparring with Jereol every day since getting back.”

“I do remember you talking about having to accomplish feats in other countries before. So, that wasn’t the only thing? You guys sure have it tough. But now that you’re both Rank A, you don’t really have anything to worry about in terms of strength, do you?”

Rank S was so rare that Rank A adventurers were effectively considered the top of the adventurers pyramid. The vast majority of people in this world could not even dream of landing a hit on—much less beating—one in battle.

“You’d think so, right?”

“I’m afraid things are not that simple.”

Both Sabato and Goma heaved a sigh. The latter continued, “The Beast King

Festival is *the* greatest tournament in all of Gaun. The list of this year's contestants includes our father, Leonhart Gaun, and the Rank S adventurer Goldiana Prettiana, among others."

"Not to mention our own brothers," Sabato added. "That over there is Jereol, our oldest brother, then there's Yujil, the second oldest. If we're unlucky, we could easily wash out in the first round. Gah, I should have focused on studying like Kildo did. Then I would have been exempted from this!"

"Sabato, that path is even more impossible for you. Return to reality. This has been your one and only option from the start."

Did I hear that right?! I'll have a legitimate reason to actually fight the Beast King one-on-one!

To my delight, Sera suggested, "Hey, Kelvin, you wanna try joining this Beast King Festival? We'd be able to get pretty far, don't you think?"

That line was such a perfect tug on my heartstri— Did you read my mind?!

"Oh, you raring to go, sister?" Dahak smirked confidently. "Then count me in too! This sounds like a great chance to show Prettia-chan what I've got!"

"We can still take part this close to the event? Then I want in too!" Rion cried, her eyes shining with excitement.

In the midst of this ruckus, even Ruka raised her hand and cried, "Me too, me too!"

"Um, Kelvin-san, if your party joins the tournament, our chances of progressing..." Goma trailed off in a troubled tone. "And the participation list has already been confirmed, so..."

In contrast to his sister, however, Sabato seemed excited. "You serious?! Now I'm pumped up like hell! WHOO! Who cares about stingy stuff like participation limits anyway?! If I beat Kelvin, forget earning the Gaun family name, I might even be promoted to Rank S! You get what I'm saying, right, Goma?! Considering how manly you ar—*pffft!*"

"Shut it, you impulsive idiot!"

Hey, it's been a while since I saw Sabato go flying.



A short while after Goma's fist of fury was unleashed once again, the Beast King returned.

"Sorry for the wait. I have readied— What are you doing, Sabato? Why are you stuck in the wall?"

"Ha...ha ha... It's nothing, old man. My sister just loves me a little too much, that's all."

"If you say so. Just mind you don't repeat that sentence in front of Kildo. Everyone, follow me this way."

You're gonna just leave Sabato there, even when he looks so beat up? What a Spartan education policy. Is this everyday life for the beastkin?

"So, about that tournament I mentioned... It's an event eminent enough to bear my title—"

"Ah, Goma gave us the rundown just now. It's a tournament that decides whether she and Sabato can adopt the Gaun family name, right?"

"Mm, that saves me trouble. If you ask me, I would love to have you and your companions participate. This is our country's largest event—even without the Naming Ceremony that follows—and, as such, it attracts applicants from both within and beyond Gaun. The preliminaries have been over for a while, and there is no way to change the number of participation slots at this stage."

"Aww..." Sera, Rion, and Ruka moaned in unison.

Were you actually serious about participating, Ruka? "That's too bad. But if it can't be helped..."

"Hold on, let me finish. Our army holds some of the participation slots, four of which have not been confirmed yet. I was originally thinking of having my son, Jereol, choose whomever he saw fit based on how well they performed in training today. Would you all be interested in challenging his candidates for their slots?"

"I knew my old man would pull through! You sure are generous!"

"Father...are you sure about this?"

“All that matters to me is livening up the tournament. I’m sure this would serve as a good motivator for the both of you too.”

Now that’s good luck! I had half given up. We’ve got to accept this!

“Good for you, Kelvin! Now four of us can join the tournament!”

“Sera-san, it’s not been decided yet. If you shout it so loudly...” Efil shot a look at the soldiers who were still training and switched to speaking telepathically.
::See? They are all glaring at us.::

::Doesn’t matter what those small fry think. I can knock them all out right now.::

::Aha ha, calm down, Sera-nee.::

::Should I do them in real quick, brother?::

I watched Rion placate Sera while using Analyze Eye to check out the Statuses of those who seemed likely to be the candidates. As far as I could tell, the strongest soldiers present were only Rank B at best, which meant Ruka actually could have beaten them. But I couldn’t allow her to join a tournament that would feature someone like Prettia.

“Jereol, have you made your choice?”

“Yes, father. You lot: forward!”

In response to Jereol’s shout, four Gaunian soldiers who appeared to be full of confidence stepped up. Every last one of them had bulging muscles and was armed to the teeth. They reminded me of Uld’s party.

“Personally, I support you and your party,” Leonhart said with a casual shrug. “However, these guys won’t just step down if told to. So would you mind showing them what you can do? One-on-one matches. Tournament rules.”

The Beast King handed me a real sword—not a practice one—while speaking loud enough for the soldiers to hear. Although he sounded serious, there was a smirk at the edge of his mouth at an angle only I could see.

In other words, you want me to get this done and over with ASAP. But fighting against such pushovers is just... Oh, right! How about I let Ruka have her fun here?

The Beast King continued, “The rules are as follows: There will be a large variety of weapons—all the same quality—prepared for the participants to use. Participants can choose freely but will have to do so beforehand. Moreover, there is one unique thing about the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena: all magic is blocked. Contestants must rely strictly on their physical abilities and, if they have any, their Unique Skills.”

“Sounds like pretty tough terms for a mage.”

“But you’re a Summoner, aren’t you?” Leonhart replied. “And Tsubaki of Toraj couldn’t stop gushing about you. Either way, yours is not a class for fighting up close. But that’s what I find interesting about you, Kelvin.”

Oh, right, word did get around about me being a Summoner during the war in Trycen. Little wonder, considering how openly I used my abilities. But that’s water under the bridge. The Adventurer’s Guild is helping me refuse all the solicitations from other countries, and Tsubaki’s about the only one brazen enough to ignore all that and come looking for me directly. That queen’s got more guts than a thousand people.

Leonhart turned to the four Gaunian candidates. “As I said, you will be fighting in matches according to tournament rules. Anyone who loses will forfeit their participation slot to Kelvin and his companions here. Think you can win?”

Can you not purposely phrase it in such a provocative way? Look at them! They’re practically frothing at the mouth. But hey, if he’s going that far, it won’t matter if I pour a little more oil on the fire, right?

“I have a suggestion. Can we present only one person to fight all four of them?”

“Oh?”

“Dear guest, it doesn’t matter who you are—you would do well not to underestimate us Gaunians!”

“We are all officers in our own right! If you confuse us for mere grunts, you will end up paying for it!”

The Beast King looked very interested at my offer, but the soldiers seemed so

furious, I almost thought I saw smoke coming from their ears.

Uh, do these officers not know who I am? Wait...

I turned to look at the Beast King, who was staring off into the distance, whistling to himself. That was all I needed to understand that he had purposely not introduced me to the soldiers.

But he called me by name several times now. How come they haven't connected the dots themself— Ah, they must all be muscleheads like Sabato. Or am I maybe not as famous as I thought.

“Ha ha ha, that sounds fine too. But then we can't test the strength of the other participants from your side.”

“We'll be sending the weakest member of our party. If she wins, we get all four slots. How does that sound? But if you really want to test us all, we could go back to making it a four-on-four.”

“How *dare* you!”

“Don't come crying to us afterwards!”

I wasn't really trying to rile them up, but my words served to turn their faces bright red.

“Mm, there's no need to confirm. I shall take you at your word, Kelvin. So, which of your companions will be representing your side?”

“Well...Ruka, think you can do this?”

“Wha— My king?!”

As planned, I'll be giving this to Ruka. I'm sure she's more than capable of winning at her current level. Gerard, shush.

“Huh? I'm the weakest?! But I'm stronger than Shutola-chan!”

“What are you saying, Ruka-chan?! I'm not a fighter—call me an intellectual!”

Uh, that's the part that bothers Ruka? Why's she comparing herself to Shutola, anyway? Shutola isn't even in our party. There's no doubt that Ellie and Ruka are the weakest in our group. They're about even with each other in terms of overall fighting prowess, but Ellie's build is more magic-based, which makes

her less suitable for fighting under the no-magic rule. On the other hand, while I can't let her participate in the actual tournament, Ruka has the ability and the motivation. She's been receiving training from both Gerard and Efil, so I know I can entrust her with this exhibition match.

"Ruka, I'm leaving this to you because I have every confidence that you can do it. Ah, you know what? If you win, I'll give you this mithril dagger of mine. I even strengthened it again recently—it's now a Rank A item! So, you interested?"

I took out my mithril dagger and dangled it in front of her. The truth was, I had just reforged the weapon I would be using going forward and couldn't figure out what to do with this one. Giving it to Ruka was a better option than just letting it sit in Clotho's Storage forever.

"Huh?! I'll do it, Master! I'll do it! It can cut ingredients really well, right?!"

"Uh, aren't there proper cooking knives in the kitchen at home?"

This blade's been bathed in the blood of quite a few enemies in its time. Should I also forge Ruka her own cooking knife?

Ruka ran off towards the center of the training ground. "I, apprentice maid Ruka, accept the challenge!" she shouted loudly, showing no signs of quailing before the hulking beastkin with faces that would make any baby burst into tears.

"My king! Are you sure about this?! Ruka won't get hurt, will she?! Ellie, speak to him! Efil, if Ruka is ever in danger, turn all these soldiers into pincushions!"

"Gerard-sama, please calm down! It'll be fine. Everything is fine. These are not our enemies."

Gerard, dude, have some faith.

The Gaunian officers, who had been silently watching with wide-open eyes, whirled towards me in unison and glared furiously.

"Are you serious about making us fight a little girl?!"

"How cheap can you be?! Is this your way of forcing us to hold back?!"

So, that's their angle? Ugh, now they're staring at me from the front, and Gerard's still staring at me from the back. What's this sandwich situation? If

anything, I prefer being stared at by girls. Not that I'm a masochist, I swear!

"I'm not a little girl! I so can fight too!"

See? Now they've gotten Ruka all huffy. So rude.

"You fools! Would you say the same when standing on the battlefield?!"

Leonhart roared, causing the soldiers to snap their mouths shut and shrink in on themselves. In sharp contrast to his earlier jocular atmosphere, the Beast King now emanated a terrible, awe-inspiring pressure that cowed everyone nearby. "Only second-rates and third-rates judge their opponents by their appearance. Don't disappoint me too much, men."

"Apologies, sir!" they cried in unison.

"If you want to enter the Beast King Festival, convince me of your worthiness with your fists, not your barks. Have I made myself clear?"

"SIR, YES, SIR!"

The Gaunians now looked confident and sure of themselves. *Looks like Leonhart does have what it takes to be a good leader.*

"Kelvin, apologies for the disrespect. Those under me tend to get hotheaded at times. And when they do, they end up with tunnel vision. I was already pushing Jereol and Yujil into fighting in arenas and dungeons when they were the same age as your companion there."

Uh, no, I don't think that's normal either. "Thank you for your consideration. In fact, it seemed like they were angry on Ruka's behalf, so far be it from me to fault them for it."

"Your understanding is greatly appreciated. Please accept my apologies, young warrior."

"Mmm...okay! I'll forgive them! I like you, miss!" said Ruka.

"Thank you! I like you lots too!"

Yeeeah, I can't figure this Beast King out.

"All right. Both sides, accept the weapons you indicated."

Another soldier approached the contestants, bearing the weapons they had

each requested. Ruka picked up the Rank D iron dagger as her four opponents grabbed a longsword, greatsword, spear, and brass knuckles, respectively. Their weapons were also made of iron and were Rank D in quality.

“Normally, we’d also get equipment for the participants, but I believe we can do without this time. My men are wearing the leather armor they train in, and your companion is in her maid uniform. Yep, looks fine to me.”

It does?! Wouldn't a normal person object to this?! But since Gerard's so worried about Ruka, it probably is best for her to stay in her maid uniform.

“All right, then,” I responded. “Let’s get this done and over with. Ruka, you got this.”

“Mh-hm!”

The rest of my companions and I made our way to the bleachers at the side of the training grounds so as to get out of the way.

“Oh my goddess, oh my goddess, oh my goddess, I’m so worried!”

“Gerard, you’re really not acting like yourself. Come on, man. Believe in Ruka. You know better than anyone how much effort she’s put in, right?”

“Well, yes, but...”

You know the maid uniform she's wearing was made by Efil, right? Weapons of that quality can't even nick her clothes, much less cut them. Not that any attack will even get close enough to make contact in the first place.

::Ah! Then I suppose... Ughhh, but what if....::

Sewing was one of Efil’s hobbies, and she liked making us clothes for fighting in as well as casual wear. Like Sera’s outfit, the uniforms worn by our maids were entirely handmade by Efil. The thing about Efil, though, was that she was never satisfied with something even after she was done making it. Every once in a while, she got the urge to upgrade it. “I washed it in the laundry and, while I was at it, I tweaked it a little” was so frequent an occurrence that my party members wouldn’t even blink when it happened at this point. The name of Ruka’s outfit was Apprentice Battle Maid Uniform VI, and it was Rank A. Although honestly, I had no idea what need there was to make the distinction

that this was for an “apprentice” maid.

“Honey, they’re about to start.”

“Mm, so they are.” *I’m gonna ignore Gerard for now. Let’s focus on the fight.*

“I, Jereol Gaun, will be refereeing this match. I am confirming one more time: in accordance with the rules of the Beast King Festival tournament, the usage of magic, items, and all weapons aside from those which were already issued is forbidden. Are both sides ready?”

Ruka’s casual drawl of “Anytime!” cut a sharp contrast to the soldiers’ spirited “Sir, yes, sir!”

Good, she’s relaxed. She’s in the best condition possible.

“First! Commander of a hundred, Captain Gobera! Forward!”

The beastkin holding a longsword walked to the center and stood in front of Ruka.

The heavy tension in the air bothered the girls in my party so little that they even started setting up a bet through the Network.

::How many seconds do you think he will last?::

Sera scoffed. ::Is that a bet, Mel? I call three seconds, with the prize being the right to sleep in Kelvin’s bed tonight!::

::That estimate is too generous, Sera-nee. Ruka’s gotten really strong lately! I’m sure she can end it in two seconds.::

::Oh, you two want to make it a bet? You’re on. But we have to clarify what constitutes a loss. Are we going to wait for the ruling? If so, there will be several seconds of lag.::

::Nah, no need. Just as soon as they lose.::

::Fine with me. Let’s go with that, then.::

::Sera-nee, Mel-nee, I’m not gonna lose!::

Wait, what’d they say they’re betting again?!

“I won’t go easy on you just because you’re a child,” the beastkin growled as

he looked down at Ruka. “If you resent that, it’s all on your master’s head.”

“Why would I ever resent Master? I’m grateful to him.”

“You poor thing...”

“Gobera, enough talking. We are now beginning the first match, with the participation slots in the Beast King Festival being the prize. Both sides, ready?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Mh-hm!”

Gobera lifted his longsword and adopted a midstance as Ruka held her daggers in a reverse grip and lowered her center of gravity. She looked like the spitting image of an assassin, but in a maid uniform.

“START!” Jereol barked, bringing his hand down to signal the beginning of the fight.

“First to move w—?! ”

“Checkmate.”

Gobera had stepped forward at the signal, but he lost sight of Ruka in the same moment. Just as his mind registered that she was no longer in view, her cute voice sounded from beside his ear and he felt cold metal against his neck. What was it he felt? Confusion? Terror? Ruka’s small figure was crouched on his right shoulder, and she was holding her iron dagger against his jugular.

“What just—?! ”

“Checkmate, right? Do you give up?” She slowly pressed harder and harder with her dagger.

“I-I give up! I surrender!”

“Match over! Winner: Ruka the apprentice maid!”

“You don’t need to say ‘apprentice’!”

The contestants parted at Jereol’s pronouncement, Ruka in a slight huff and Gobera looking thoroughly stunned. *All right, one win for us. I knew she could do it in the blink of an eye. Ruka’s getting really good at applying her forte—speed—with Covert Action.*



“So, she really did live up to Kelvin’s claim.”

“Father, can you stop bringing in such overwhelming contestants? That’s the party of ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin, a Rank S adventurer like you, right? If that girl is their weakest member, I shudder to imagine what the rest can do. She alone is already faster than our best captain, Guin, whose entry into the tournament we confirmed first thing.”

“Think of this as a present from me to you guys, my complacent children. You’re grateful, right? Of course you are.”

The remaining Gaunian officers Ruka would be facing looked completely bewildered by what had just happened, but the Beast King and the lion prince seemed to have had no issue following along with her movements. Leonhart was one thing, but I had heard that Jereol was also close to Rank S in regard to fighting prowess. Ruka had indeed gotten stronger, but she was still far from strong enough to face those two.

“WHOOAAAA! RUKA WON! Ellie, did you see that?! Did you not burn it into your eyes?!”

“Mm, I was indeed watching, Gerard-sama. It is all thanks to your careful and attentive instruction.”

“That could not be further from the truth! This is purely the result of Ruka’s efforts thus far. Oh, the next match is starting soon!”

Dude, where did your excessive worrying go? But you know what, I’m gonna just let Ellie deal with Gerard. I’ve noticed she’s really good at handling him.

“Next! Commander of a hundred, Captain Bandel! Forward!”



“Match over! Winner: Ruka the apprentice maid!”

“That’s the fourth time you called me that even though I told you not to! Are you bullying me, mister?!”

The three matches that followed were also over in the blink of an eye, with Ruka winning them all in quick succession. Her opponents wielded different weapons and stepped into the ring with full vigilance, but it meant nothing

because their eyes couldn't actually register her. The instant the start signal went off, she ended the match then and there. The beastkin were in disbelief, while Ruka was again in a bit of a huff. All the matches had started and ended in the same way. There wasn't the slightest chance for an upset.

"That concludes all four matches!" Jereol pronounced. "The four participation slots in the Beast King Festival are hereby ceded to Kelvin and his companions. No objections, correct?"

The four Gaunian soldiers remained silent, their ears laid flat on their heads. After losing so completely, there was nothing they could say.

"Hey, everyone! I did it!" Ruka gushed as she ran back to us.

Sera ruffled her hair. "Well done."

"RUKAAAAA! I'm just, I'm, gahhhh, I'm so moved my tears won't stop! The tears inside my heart!"

Everyone heaped their praises on the young girl as she latched on to Ellie.

Putting Gerard aside for the time being, it's true that Ruka did a great job.

"Here's the mithril dagger I promised. Take good care of it."

"Thank you, Master! I'll carefully use it when cutting ingre—"

"I'll make you a proper kitchen knife later, so please don't use this for cooking. It's purely for you to defend yourself with, okay?"

As I handed the weapon over, I checked her Status using Analyze Eye.

Ruka (10 y/o, Female, Human, Apprentice Maid)

Level: 94

Title: Step-Granddaughter of the Sword Guru

HP: 316/316

MP: 277/277

Strength: 202

Endurance: 134 (+22)

Agility: 390

Magic: 99

Luck: 438

Skills: Sword Mastery (Rank A), Combat Technique (Rank D), Acrobatics (Rank D), Covert Action (Rank D), Service (Rank F), Cooking (Rank B), Sewing (Rank F)

Passive Effects: Concealment (Rank S), Cooking/Large Endurance Increase (Rank S)

Ruka was not particularly talented in any way. However, she was now about as strong as Touya was when I first met him. There was no better way to demonstrate the effectiveness of Experience Sharing.

Hey, grandpa, your granddaughter is as strong as a Hero. Please put more faith in her. Wait a moment... Is the reason Ruka's class is still Apprentice Maid because she's spending all her skill points on battle-related skills instead of maid-related ones? Or is it because everyone around her has yet to acknowledge her as a proper maid in her own right? I'm pretty sure her abilities as a maid are steadily improving, though...



"Well then, we'll take our leave. We're looking forward to the dinner tomorrow," Kelvin said, bowing respectfully to Leonhart.

"As am I," the Beast King replied.

After obtaining the four participation slots at the upcoming tournament, Kelvin exchanged a promise with Leonhart to join him for dinner the next day, then left with his companions. They were off to enjoy the city's sights, with Goma and Sabato as their guides.

The four matches had not even lasted ten seconds total—it was truly over in the blink of an eye. For the Gaunian soldiers who had been dreaming of participating in the competition, it had been like getting struck by lightning on a clear day.

After watching the Beast King head back towards the palace in high spirits, the first Gaunian soldier who had lost, Gobera, could not curb his curiosity any longer and turned to ask Jereol, "Sir, who *were* those people just now?"

“What, did you really not figure it out? And here I was, impressed by how much of a strong front you put up.”

“Ugh... I-I’m sorry, sir...”

“Actually, um, I don’t know either,” mumbled Bandel, the second contestant, timidly raising his hand. The other two also followed suit.

“Oh, that’s right. When Kelvin rose to fame, you were all stationed at the Trycenian border. I assume you haven’t had time to catch up with the reports, although I’m probably as behind as you are.”

Kelvin’s promotion had taken place immediately after he had beaten back the invasion of the Village of Elves. Due to his party’s efforts, the settlement had been saved, and this achievement had confirmed his promotion to Rank S. While he was going through those proceedings, Jereol, Yujil, and Kilty had been dispatched to the Gaun-Trycen border as part of the country’s effort to bolster its defenses. The four beastkin officers who just fought Ruka had been part of that group.

“I’m sure father brought this idea up with full knowledge of who I would select,” Jereol murmured to himself, scratching his head with a troubled expression. “Sabato and Goma, looks like this year isn’t gonna be easy for you...”

“Um, Jereol-sama?”

“Ah, sorry, I was talking to myself. You guys want to know who Kelvin is, right?”

“Uh, yes, sir.”

“He’s a Rank S adventurer, just like my father. After he registered as an adventurer, he shot to the top in the blink of an eye, setting a historic record by reaching Rank S in only three months. His party protected the Village of Elves from the entire Trycenian invasion single-handedly and was fighting alongside the Hero when he defeated the Demon Lord. He can subjugate Rank S monsters by himself, his house has an infinite labyrinth underground, he is in deep with the Oracle of Deramis... Even I don’t know how true they are, but there is no end to the stories about him.”

The officers' jaws dropped as they found themselves dumbfounded for the second time that day.

"You guys don't have to look *that* surprised."

"I mean...how can we not be?"

"Those have got to be exaggerations. They sound too far-fetched to all be true."

"As I said, even I don't know how much is true. But there is one thing I now know for sure: I'm still far from reaching Rank S."

"His maid was *that* strong?!"

"Oh no, the young warrior—her name was Ruka, I believe?—I could beat without issue. The problem is those who were watching. Bandel, you've fought Dan D'Alba directly, haven't you? The man said to be Trycen's most powerful fighter?"

"Ugh, please don't remind me of that nightmarish memory. Even you didn't stand a chance against him, Jereol-sama."

Bandel and his company of one hundred operated under Jereol, who commanded a total of a thousand men. Bandel had been among the soldiers who had attempted to assault General Dan with a spear, but he had been lifted up—spear and all—and thrown at his own allies. The memory was so traumatic that Bandel broke into a cold sweat just recalling it.

"You're right," Jereol agreed. "All three of us, along with all our men, were unable to defeat Dan D'Alba. That's how powerful he is. So I'll use him as a point of reference to make this easy to understand. Kelvin, as well as each and every one of his companions, is beyond, or at least on par with, Dan."

"That can't be!"

"But, that's... Huh?!"

The four officers could hardly be faulted for their surprise. They had just seen firsthand how easily Ruka overwhelmed them. Then Jereol claimed he could easily beat Ruka. But Dan could easily overwhelm *him*, and supposedly, each and every person in the group who had been looking on was at least as strong

as Dan.

It was commonly said that a single Rank S adventurer was powerful enough to stave off an entire country's military forces. In this case, however, the analogy would take on a different meaning. Namely, Kelvin, along with the party he led, had enough fighting power to rival the four great nations of the Eastern Continent, never mind the numerous smaller countries that dotted the Western Continent.

I suppose we should be thankful that it wasn't Kelvin who turned into the Demon Lord. If it was, father would be the only one in our country capable of stopping him. Or could he? I can't accurately gauge power levels so far beyond my own. Hmm, is father attempting to get a read on Kelvin's strength by having him participate in the Beast King Festival?

Under normal circumstances, the champion of the tournament would have, in all likelihood, either been Leonhart Gaun or Goldiana Prettiana, the latter of whom had taken home the trophy last year. Now, however, four dark horses had been thrown into the pool, and it was anyone's guess as to how things would turn out. Jereol deeply sympathized with his two youngest siblings, whose chances at winning the Gaun name had now been practically thrown into the middle of a storm.

"Jereol-sama, are you saying that blonde girl holding the stuffed toy is also as strong as Dan? Is she so strong that I wouldn't be able to lift a finger if I faced her in battle?!"

"Hm? Ah, that young lady—" Jereol barely caught himself before he told Gobera about Shutola being an exception. Only a select few—the highest echelons in the four major powers on the continent, plus a handful who had been deemed trustworthy—knew about Shutola being under Kelvin's protection. The public narrative was that she was currently recovering at Trycen Castle. In a split second, Jereol came to the conclusion that the best way to gloss things over would be to pretend that she too was one of Kelvin's party members.

"—also possesses incredible power. I could feel it very keenly. What else can you expect from a companion of a Rank S adven—"

“So the little girl *is* that strong! And I would lose to her! She would step on me with her tiny little feet. Oh, no! I would lose my confidence! I would have no words for how I would feel!”

“Uhhh...that’s right. Yes. Um, don’t let it get you too down.”

It seemed as if Gobera had just awakened to something after losing to Ruka. Even Jereol could not hide his alarm.

Wait, Gobera is part of Kilto’s company, right? Birds of a feather do flock together...

He quickly recomposed himself. Thanks to the Beast King’s punishing methods of education, all the children of the Gaunian royal family had impressive mental fortitude.



With the start of the Beast King Festival drawing near, the powerful individuals who would be participating began gathering in the city one by one. One of the locations of these gatherings was a small café at the edge of town where two people emanating incredible auras were currently sharing a table. They were in the middle of enjoying a slice of fresh cream cake, a delicacy not very well known in this world.

“Oh my! I’m so touched! I can’t believe how wonderful this sweet is! And to think I’m encountering it in Gaun, of all places!”

Goldiana Prettiana, the previous tournament champion of the Beast King Festival, giggled proudly. “Coming here was the right choice after all, right? This place is my favorite.”

“Oh, for sure! This definitely made the swim from the Western Continent worth it. Is this what they call a fateful encounter?” replied the person sitting across from him ecstatically.

Although this person spoke in a feminine voice, he—no, *she* was cut from the same cloth as Peach Ogre. She had her hair cut short and was not wearing women’s clothing, but there was no room for doubt that she belonged on “that” side.

“Oh my, Grostina, hon! You know you’re supposed to take a boat, right? Swimming across the ocean is dangerous!”

“How can I not come as fast as I can when you call me, sister dear? You even secured a participation slot for me in the tournament! And with the Demon Lord defeated, the monsters have returned to their previous strength.”

“You’re as confident as ever, I see. Well, that *is* why I contacted you, my one and only sister disciple, in the first place.”

“And I couldn’t be more thankful! You helped me awaken my true self when I was weak, and guided the powerless noble that I was to the light. So, what are we aiming for this time?”

“Oh, you silly. Do you even have to ask? We’ve got to take the top two spots, of course! When we shine together on stage, our charm will double! No, it will quadruple! I’m sure even *that* straitlaced gentleman will look my way then!”

“My, oh my! You have a new love, sister dear?! It’s love, isn’t it?! Please allow little old me, Grostina Brujowana, to support you in any way I can!”

Unbeknownst to Gerard, who was currently having a great time, danger to his life was currently developing in a corner of the same city he was in.



Ange said she had to show her face at the Gaun Adventurer’s Guild first and headed off her own way. As part of our guided tour of the capital city, Sabato and Goma brought us to Gaun’s largest market. The wide avenue was packed with stands on either side that were cleverly designed to blend into the greenery all around, creating a truly fantastical scene.

“It smells so good! There’re so many stores! But we’re in a forest!” Shutola exclaimed, her head swiveling excitedly.

Rion nodded enthusiastically. “This really does scream ‘fantasy’!”

“Sometimes you say difficult things that I don’t understand, Rion-chan.”

The sight of the younger ones practically bouncing off the walls brought a warm smile to my face. The older girls were fully enjoying themselves at the stalls where vendors were demonstrating how to cook meat, the product that

Gaun was most famous for exporting. However, even though it all fell under the umbrella term of “meat,” the exact ingredients and methods of cooking used by the stalls were unbelievably varied. It was almost criminal how many mouthwatering smells were wafting about in the air, tickling the noses of those passing by.

Efil was particularly fired up. Her eyes remained wide open as she attempted to steal all the cooking techniques and recipes that she came across.

Efil, you're free to concentrate, but you're being so intense that the chef behind the counter is almost shrinking into himself.

With the Beast King Festival being right around the corner, the roads were filled with a huge variety of races, and the air of the city was charged with energy and cheer.

Visiting Gaun at this time of year was the right choice after all. The mood is just perfect for sightseeing. I don't have a worry in the world!

Or so I thought.

“Urk...”

“Ack...”

“Ugh...”

All of a sudden, chills ran down my back. Gerard and Dahak also reacted the same way at the same time. We all shivered at something.

“What happened to you three?” Sera asked. “Your faces are pale.”

Efil turned around with concern. “Have you caught a cold, Master? And you two as well, Gerard-san and Hak-chan?”

“No, no, don't worry, Efil. I don't feel sick. But I did feel a chill for some reason.”

“Mh-hm, and I felt some incredibly huge danger closing in on me. Something that almost seemed life-threatening.”

“An' I felt as if I just gained a new rival.”

Sera gave us a weird look. “What's with those oddly specific hunches?”

My gut tells me that I shouldn't think too deeply about this but that things will take a bad turn if I do nothing. I have no idea what makes me think that. It's not any of my detection skills reacting, so I can only chalk it up to intuition, but...

"Honey, honey! That stall over there is incredible!" Melfina grabbed my right hand and before I had time to resist, dragged me over.

"Whoa, wh-what?!"

The issue still hasn't been resolved...but I suppose there's not much I can do about it, so oh well. Yay for positive thinking.

"Hey, you sure have a good eye for quality," Sabato commented, looking somewhat impressed. "Goma and I like this one too. Right, Goma?"

"I do like it, but don't gorge yourself like you did last time, all right? You'll upset your stomach again."

I took a look at what the stall was selling. "Oh, steak cubes on skewers? The size of each piece looks pretty large too." *So, basically barbecue skewers. I can see even one skewer being filling, considering how much meat is on it.*

"That's right! What's more, it's even coated in a secret sauce!" Melfina gushed, gulping audibly.

"We're almost at the restaurant we booked, so...just a bit, then."

"I LOVE YOU, HONEY!" Melfina enveloped me in a bear hug.

Isn't it rare to see a goddess this honest about her desires? Anyway, how many should I buy to tide her over?

"Hi, storekeep, give me twenty skewers, please."

"T-Twenty?! I see you have a large party with you, boss, but the children would find it hard to finish even one."

"Ah, don't worry about it. We'll finish all of it, no problem. Here's the money."

It's true that Shutola and Ruka probably won't be able to eat a whole skewer by themselves, and it's true that Rion and Efil don't eat that much either. But it doesn't matter, because this is all for Melfina.

"Thank you for your business, boss. Uh, it's gonna take a while to cook so

many. Can you wait a bit, please?”

This stall was the type that would start cooking after receiving an order so that they could serve the food fresh instead of letting it sit out. Efil watched closely to burn every part of the process into her brain. The intense stare by a drop-dead beauty caused this chef, just like all the others, to become somewhat flustered. However, he managed to recover and, with skillful movements, finished skewer after skewer.

Do you actually intend to steal the recipes of every single stall here, Efil?

“Ohhhh! Seeing Mel eat that much makes me want to challen— I’m joking! It’s just a joke, Goma! Please lower that fist! Seriously, I didn’t mean it! You’re gonna put the whole crowd in danger if you punch me here!”

Mel hummed in high spirits, refusing to let go of my arm as she also stared intensely at the skewers coming off the grill. She did not spare even a passing glance at the scene of carnage developing behind us.

Tsk-tsk. What a coldhearted goddess she is.

“Oh, is Mel holding back for once?” Sera asked.

“I’ve got to leave room for all the other dishes being sold on this road,” Mel replied, looking smug as if she were sharing a brilliant idea. “And Efil can make me the same thing again anytime I want.”

“I promise to master this recipe by the time we return to Parth!”

Wait, she has room for more? Dammit, my estimate was off!

“Brother, I don’t see any stalls selling vegetables. It’s all just meat. I want my veggies!”

Dahak was looking around peevishly, seemingly having finished off the vegetable sticks that he usually kept on hand. However, as he had noted, none of the stores close by were selling vegetables.

Maybe Sabato would kn— Ah, never mind, the two of them are still at it.

“The restaurant we’re going to will serve vegetables, so if you can’t eat meat, hold on till we get there.”

“Seriously?! Whoaaa, I’m so touched, brother!”

“Eep!”

I reflexively swept Melfina off her feet while dodging Dahak, who charged towards me for a hug. Melfina, who had been fully engrossed in the cooking process, was taken by surprise and let out a cute little squeal right beside my ear.

“What?! Why did you dodge, brother?!”

“When you do it, it kinda gives the impression that we’re, you know...”

“We’re...what?”

“I don’t really want to think about it anymore, so let’s drop it.”

If you really want to express your thanks, instead of hugging me, just get stronger. Much stronger. Considering their levels, Dahak, Boga, and Mdofarak—whom I’m collectively calling Dragonz going forward—are probably close to Evolving, but they’re already ancient dragons. What would their next Evolution be, dragon kings? Or are there more conditions for that besides level?

“Um, honey...”

“Ah, sorry. I’ll let you down now.”

When I looked down, I realized I had embraced Melfina in the “princess carry” pose. I had done it without thinking, but now that I was aware of it, it was pretty embarrassing. Even though I quickly let her down, Melfina’s face remained bright red and steam continued rising from the top of her head.

Whoa, her temperature’s shooting through the roof!

“Mel! Are you all right?!”

“Ah, I’m, uh, okay. It was just so sudden that I, uh, was a bit surprised.”

“That’s a bit rare for you. You sure you’re not the one with a cold?”

“I d-d-don’t have a cold, at all! Ah, honey, look! The skewers are done!”

Melfina’s the type to be really proactive about making advances, but could it be that she’s weak when she’s on the receiving end? The Demon Lord Obliteration Proposal also came about due to her getting flustered. In short,

she's a glass cannon who's great at offense but extremely weak at defense. That's...so cute! All right, Parallel Processing, make sure to burn an image of her current self into my mental photo gallery. Right next to the flashes of underwear that the Beast King showed me using Goma's body.

"Thank you for waiting, boss." The storekeeper handed me the skewers I'd ordered, all wrapped in large leaves that gave the steak a faintly aromatic and sweetish flavor.

Wow, this is pretty heavy! I think each skewer has about three hundred grams of meat. This much just might be enough to hold Melfina over until we get to the restaurant!

"Om, nom... Honey, nom... Don't stare at me so, nom, intensely."

Hold on, is her eating speed getting even faster?! Is this her hiding her embarrassment?!

In the end, we had to drop by three other stalls to purchase an unbelievable amount of meat before we finally reached the restaurant.



It had been a long, long journey indeed. Every step we took, a skewer disappeared. Every other step, a meat bun did too. We stopped multiple times to restock, but the rate at which our companion goddess was going through the food never faltered. By the time we actually got to the restaurant we had booked, I was filled with an incredible sense of achievement. *Honestly, I underestimated Melfina's natural talent.*

"But you're still gonna eat more, right?"

"Do you efen haf fo fas? Of courf I fill."

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

The serving staff visited our table in an unending stream, stacking a mountain of plates in front of us. Our goddess was gorging herself with relish, a smile of sheer bliss permanently on her face and all embarrassment thrown to the wind. This place was famous as one of the best in Gaun, and it was only by going through the Adventurer's Guild that we had managed to get a reservation. Its

menu was loaded with not only meat dishes, which was a given in this country, but also delectable vegetarian options. The chefs were all at the top of their respective fields. Ange, who was still busy with work, had strongly recommended the place. I greatly trusted her taste, as it also had been her who had first pointed me towards the Fairy's Song.

"Damn, I thought I'd gotten used to seeing it at the Grand Scarlet Canyon, but after being separated for a while, I'm impressed all over again by how huge your appetite is, Mel."

"Sabato, there you go being rude again."

"No, Goma, I didn't mean that sarcastically! I actually am impressed!"

"It's true that she's eating more than usual today. Are you that hungry, Mel-nee?"

"I had to expend more energy than usual, so I have to eat more than usual now. But the upside is that I get to eat more than usual, so you won't find me complaining!"

Mh-hm, that smile makes it very obvious how happy you are. But can you start reeling it in, please? It's not that we're running out of money, it's more that—

"Hey, dude, isn't that The Smile?"

"You mean the competitive eater who's rumored to be going around crushing all the food-eating contests in town?"

"Yeah, that's her! I heard she was given that alias because people say she keeps on smiling no matter what she's eating. Her record is completely spotless—she's never lost a contest before. Those in the know say she might be the most powerful warrior to appear in all of history. Even so, that amount is just..."

"Whereas other fighters would gradually slow down, she's actually getting faster and faster! And there's her characteristic smile! She really does live up to her name!"

You're really garnering a lot of attention, Mel!

Dahak, who was taking large bites of raw vegetables, asked casually, "Brother, do you want me to shut them up?"

“Stop. It’s gonna cause an even bigger commotion if you do,” I responded without missing a beat. *Your thought process is starting to become similar to Nagua’s, dude.* Then I turned to Mel. “By the way, were you up to something I don’t know about, Mel? Did you create another ruckus?”

“Huh?!”

Ah, her smile froze.

“Um, that’s... I was just walking around town, absolutely normal, and I sort of ran out of money, but I was feeling peckish, so, um...”

“Hold on a minute there. Didn’t I give you plenty of cash to spend? What happened to all that money?”

I periodically handed out allowances to all my party members, with the amount being enough to buy the most expensive weapons on sale in stores. Sera poured that money into fishing or instruments, Efil used it to buy cloth for sewing, and so on. However, Mel’s room was quite bare, having a bare minimum of furniture. I footed the bill for all the materials she needed to make accessories with, and everyday necessities didn’t cost all that much.

I honestly can’t think of any major expenses that Mel has that would be such a huge drain on her finances. What is she using her money on?

“I was, uh, buying little bites to eat, and before I knew it, my wallet was empty.”

“You spent *all* that money on food? How much do you eat out on the daily?!”

“Hey, there are days when I just suddenly feel hungry! I’m embarrassed to admit it, though.”

We have three meals at home each day and she never misses a single one. And it turns out she’s eating even more in between?! But seeing what she’s like today, I’m convinced this just might be true.

“I’m not mad at all, just saying. For stuff like this, tell me. I’ll do something about it.”

“Honeyyyyyy!”

I’m sure that for her, this is a matter of life and death. And...well, I’m going to

be her, um, husband eventually. As a guy, I'd want her to rely on me. For starters, I'm going to have Efil cook more. If I don't, I worry Melfina might become famous worldwide as a competitive eater.

"By the way, Kel-nii, have you noticed how the format of our titles seems to have changed recently? There's not only Mel-nee's 'The Smile,' which the other customers mentioned just now, but mine has also changed to 'Black Meteor.'"

"Oh, you too, Rion? Mine became 'Empress' before I knew it."

"Mm? Mine has also changed. I'm now 'Sword Guru,' it seems."

"Kel-nii, is this what I think it is?!" Rion looked up at me, her eyes sparkling.

I mean, it probably is. I had noticed everyone's new titles right after their Evolutions. Chances were they had all been updated while I was asleep. This had happened to Clotho, Gerard, Efil, Sera, Rion, Alex, and Melfina—all my companions who were publicly known. There was one single conclusion to draw from this that seemed significantly more likely than anything else.

"That's right! It is exactly what you think it is, Rion-chan!"

"WHOA! You surprised me, Ange! Since when have you been here?!"

Ange, who had supposedly gone off to visit the Gaun Adventurer's Guild, was suddenly standing behind my chair. Although it was true that I hadn't had my guard up, it really was strange how she managed to sneak up on me *again* after that time in Parth. The fact that she didn't possess the Covert Action skill made it even more impressive. *She's much too talented to remain a mere guild receptionist.*

"Heh heh heh, Sera-san noticed me," she giggled mischievously. "Rank S Kelvin-kun, it looks like you still have a ways to go. Ah, waiter, one bottle of wine, please."

"You really do get it, Ange. Kelvin has a habit of letting the ball drop at the end," Sera replied in agreement. "Oh, excuse me, a glass of juice for me."

"One more of the same for Shutola-chan and me, please!"

"Ruka-chan, my tummy's all full already."

"Don't let it get you down, Kelvin! I get taken by surprise every day—almost

always by Goma.”

I know Sabato is trying to cheer me up, but that consideration just makes me feel worse.

“Ahem. That was fast, Ange. Is your business at the guild already finished?”

“Mh-hm. Though my real aim was something else. Rion-chan hit it on the head just now, actually. Here, take a look at this.”

“A book? Uh...Adventurer Directory?”

“That’s right! The Adventurer’s Guild issues a new edition right before every Naming Ceremony. It lists all of the most famous adventurers and includes descriptions of them and their party members. This time, you finally made it in!”

I don’t really get it. Is that a big thing?

Sabato clapped my back. “Congrats, Kelvin! I suppose it was only a matter of course, though, now that you’re Rank S and all. Getting into the directory is a huge honor as an adventurer! Rank S is guaranteed, but you have to be really famous as a Rank A to get your own entry!”

“The directory’s released in all the guild branches worldwide, so you might even receive job requests from the Western Continent,” Ange added.

That would mean going to and fro between the continents, right? How would the logistics of that work? Which reminds me, I wonder how the Heroes are doing. They’re probably fine, considering they never did get in touch through the pendant I gave them, but still.

“So, going back to what Rion-chan was talking about earlier. Because of the recent Demon Lord incident, the guild has acknowledged the strength of everyone in your party, Kelvin, and decided on aliases for them all! The directory goes into detail about each name.”

Before Ange finished speaking, Rion had already crawled onto my lap. “Kel-nii, let’s look at it! Quickly! Our aliases!”

Although her Status already reflected what alias she had received, she was extremely excited to find out what the inspiration for it was.

“So, we’re all gonna get introduced in turn?” Dahak asked, looking moved. “I can understand your anticipation, m’lady!”

“Um, I’m sorry, Dahak-san. Back when this edition was written, you weren’t yet known as part of Kelvin’s party, and there wasn’t time to update the manuscript,” Ange interrupted in an apologetic tone.

“O-Okay. It doesn’t bother me a-at all. That’s cool too.”

“I’m very, very sorry.”

The atmosphere cooled down in the blink of an eye. *You wanted to get into the book that badly, Dahak?*

“Anyway, take a look inside, Kelvin. It’s supposed to go on sale after the Naming Ceremony, but this is basically your comp copy, so you get it ahead of time.”

My companions gathered around me, filled with curiosity, as I cracked the book open. When all was said and done, they were all equally interested. I prayed that everyone else’s aliases were given for reasons less silly than Mel’s was.

As I randomly flipped through the pages, I saw names followed by physical descriptions, explanations of aliases, and so much more. *Uh, it says “Danger Ranking,” but...this isn’t actually a bounty list, is it?*

“Ah, I knew that part would catch your eye, Kelvin. See, the closer the adventurer is to the top, the more overwhelming their strength is. The Danger Ranking is something we added to warn countries to treat these adventurers carefully and cautiously.”

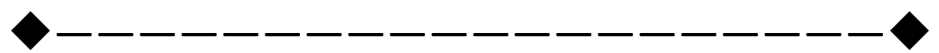
What are we, bombs?

I cleared my throat to change gears and resumed my page flipping. There was no table of contents, but the book wasn’t all that thick, so I figured I’d eventually find our group. The blocks of text were at times interspersed with simple sketches that, strangely enough, were actually kind of cute.

Suddenly, Rion tapped my shoulder. “Hold on, Kel-nii. Isn’t this page Sylvie’s? It says ‘Ice Princess’ in big letters at the top.”

“It is indeed,” Efil agreed. “It appears she’s been given more page space than everyone else.”

Hey, she’s right. All the Rank A adventurers only have half a page, shared with their parties, but Sylvia and her companions get a fancy two-page spread. There’s even a cute chibi illustration of Sylvia smack dab in the middle, complete with the large head and all. Is this book seriously an official release from the guild?



Rank S Adventurer: “Ice Princess” Sylvia (Danger Ranking: D)

Major Achievements

- Wiped out a nest of high-ranking monsters that suddenly appeared close to Leigant Ice Mountain and defended the nearby villages
- Discovered and conquered a dungeon within the depths of Toraj Ocean
- Winner of the 43rd Eastern Continent Competitive Eating Championship
- Subjugated numerous Rank S monsters

General Description

Sylvia-shi is a young swordswoman who reached Rank S last year. She skipped out on the promotion ceremony hosted in her honor in Gaun, remaining a complete mystery until she showed up to serve as Kelvin-shi’s opponent in his own promotion exhibition this year. Their fight was fierce and furious to the point of destroying the barrier erected by the Oracle of Deramis. Although she ultimately lost the match in what was very nearly a draw, Sylvia-shi more than proved she possesses strength befitting the Rank S title. Despite being a Rank S adventurer, she has a relatively low Danger Ranking of “D,” as she will become hostile only if someone first attacks her or her companions. However, Sylvia-shi does have an airheaded side to her that can sometimes cause harmless comments to spiral into enormous misunderstandings—just a small chance. Maybe.

Alias

Sylvia-shi, whose popularity is steadily rising, bears flowing, silver-colored hair and has elegant features. Her alias of “Ice Princess” is derived from her simultaneous display of exquisite swordsmanship and powerful Blue Magic. She is able to attack both up close and from a distance as the situation calls for, having an incredible knack for snap decision-making and a balanced build that is high in physical attack, magical attack, and defense. Many are looking forward to what this youngest member of the Rank S adventurers will achieve in the future.

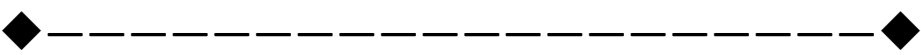
Party Members

Rank A Adventurer: Ema (Danger Ranking: E)

Ema-shi is a Red Mage who became an adventurer at the same time Sylvia-shi did. The two have been operating together ever since registering. Her achievements are enough to qualify her for promotion to Rank S, but she herself seems to have no interest in applying. She rarely shows her strength in public, but it is rumored that she is as powerful as Sylvia-shi.

Mercenary: “Brutal Beast” Nagua (Danger Ranking: A)

Nagua-shi is a beastkin mercenary hired by Sylvia-shi in Gaun. He is the party’s attack specialist and goes by the alias “Brutal Beast.” The reason for this alias is because he is both famous for his brutality in Gaun and incredibly well-known as a mercenary in his own right. This man is at the root of ninety percent of the issues caused by Sylvia-shi’s party, so we advise caution when appropriate...



The description went on to introduce the rest of Sylvia’s party members in turn. Even though this was supposed to be a publication officially acknowledged by the Adventurer’s Guild, there was a distinctly gossipy hint to the pages. *Does the competitive eating championship thing even count as an official achievement?*

“Ah, that’s because Sylvia-san is a Rank S adventurer,” Ange explained in response to Efil’s earlier question. “Many people are really interested in her

right now, so her description is extra long. Ah, don't worry, your pages received just as much attention!"

"I mean, it's all the same to me."

"Hey, Ange, what is this Danger Ranking based on?" Sera asked, pointing to the words on the page. "It's not strength in battle, obviously. Sylvia is a lot stronger than Dog Man, but she was given a D while he got an A. How does that figure?"

The rest of us, including me, nodded in agreement.

"The Danger Ranking is less about how strong the person is and more about how likely one would be to get into a fight with that person. Everyone who gets a mention in this book is the same in the eyes of us common people in that they're all so powerful, we can't even dream of beating them. That is why Nagua-san, who might start throwing fists right off the bat, is considered more dangerous than Sylvia-san, who can be reasoned with."

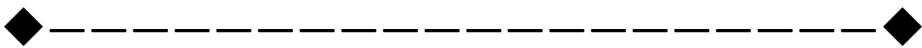
"Ahhh...okay, that makes sense." *That is one easy-to-understand example. It's true that from that perspective, Nagua is much more of a threat.*

"Kel-nii, let's see our own page quickly!"

"Right, right. Um, lemme see..."

"Here, right?" Sera reached out and casually flipped to a random page that turned out to be ours.

"Thanks." *She got it just like that?! I can't say I dislike the way she casually uses her overwhelming Luck for the most unnecessary things.*



Rank S Adventurer: "Grim Reaper" Kelvin Celsius (Danger Ranking: A)

Major Achievements

Wiped out the Black Wind bandit ring in cooperation with the Heroes of Deramis

Beat back the Trycenian force attempting to invade Gaun

Contributed greatly to the subjugation of Demon Lord Zel

Subjugated numerous Rank S monsters

General Description

Kelvin-shi is a Green Mage who climbed up the ladder and reached Rank S in record time...or so we thought until it was revealed in the recent Demon Lord incident that he is actually one of the few Summoners in existence. Despite possessing a support class, he managed to make huge waves during his promotion exhibition match by claiming victory over his fellow Rank S adventurer, Sylvia-shi. Of course, he himself possesses incredible fighting strength, but what is even more terrifying about Kelvin-shi is that those in his party all possess sufficient strength to take down Rank S monsters on their own.

It is said that Kelvin-shi receives nonstop solicitations from a number of countries in light of his being a highly sought-after Summoner and because of the strength of his companions, but that he, like all other Rank S adventurers, turns down those offers. At “A,” his Danger Ranking is high, making him someone to watch out for. As a certain Trycenian general has proven, attempting to make a move on any of his women is a sure way of earning his ire. No matter how far you run, he will chase you to the very gates of hell, literally taking on the role of the Grim Reaper.

Alias

There is no name more suitable for describing the sight of Kelvin-shi in his black robe, swinging his giant scythe with a fearless grin stretching from ear to ear, than “Grim Reaper.” On the streets, he is also referred to by other nicknames, the most prominent examples being “Battle Junkie,” “Philanderer,” and “War Poet.” For the sake of his honor, however, we clarify on his behalf that only some of these are truly substantiated.

Party Members

Slime: “Everlasting Darkness” Clotho (Danger Ranking: E)

Clotho-shi is a slime that Kelvin-shi employs through his Summoning skill. At first glance, Clotho-shi looks like your common, everyday slime, but do not be misled. Its tiny form can be endlessly expanded and, as the most senior member of the party, it possesses strength even beyond that of ancient dragons, those symbols of calamity said to be walking catastrophes. Its alias of “Everlasting Darkness” was designated in reference to its ability to swallow everything and anything it desires. If the guild were to assign a subjugation level to Clotho-shi, it would be Rank S without doubt. However, as long as you do not attempt to harm it in any way, it is not particularly dangerous.

Knight: “Sword Guru” Gerard (Danger Ranking: D)

This old knight in jet-black armor is, just like Clotho-shi, another senior member of the party. No one has ever seen his true face, though there are rumors of him coming from a line of fallen nobility. His alias of “Sword Guru” was decided based on the way he handily wields his greatsword and shield, both of which are so massive as to be armor in their own right. Cowardly actions such as abusing children are strictly forbidden in his presence.

Rank A Adventurer: “Bombing Princess” Efil (Danger Ranking: F)

This half-elf is the maid who manages everything on Kelvin-shi’s estate. She has a very gentle personality and is extremely cute and beautiful. Her cooking is so remarkable that it is enough to make even the Queen of Toraj groan in bliss and to make all who take a bite burst into tears and fall in love straight away. Furthermore, she possesses incredible skill with the bow and is entirely beyond reproach as a servant. The roaring flames that she shoots through a unique integration of Red Magic with archery contain more than enough destructive power to live up to the alias of “Bombing Princess.” As an aside, she is a slave belonging to Kelvin-shi.

Pugilist: “Empress” Sera (Danger Ranking: C)

Sera-shi is a stunningly beautiful woman whom Kelvin-shi once saved. Although her class is Pugilist, she is a genius who also boasts unparalleled talent with magic and commands great respect from both men and women. There are multiple eyewitness accounts of Trycenian soldiers, who were supposed to be her enemies, faithfully carrying out her orders during the Demon Lord incident.

This charisma and authority she possesses, which can convince even soldiers to betray their home country, deserves no less of an alias than “Empress.” Her Danger Ranking is slightly on the high side as she has a tendency to get emotional, but there is only one major thing to watch out for when it comes to Sera-shi: never, EVER allow her to drink alcohol. As an aside, she is Kelvin-shi’s lover.

Spear User: “The Smile” Mel (Danger Ranking: E)

Bearing luscious azure hair and gleaming azure armor, Mel-shi is a rare flash of color within this party that mainly wears black. No matter the occasion, she always has “The Smile” of a holy mother on her face, even as she obliterates enemies with her overwhelming battle strength. Those familiar with her also know that she possesses an incredible appetite. True to her alias, she never stops smiling no matter what—and how much—she’s eating. If you run an eating establishment, you would do well to be wary of her. As an aside, she is Kelvin-shi’s fiancée.

Swordsman: “Black Meteor” Rion Celsius (Danger Ranking: F)

Rion-shi is a dual-wielding Swordsman who is also Kelvin-shi’s younger sister. She is incredibly friendly and amicable, always having a smile ready for anyone she encounters. It is rumored that she is on close terms with the heads of state of all four major powers on the Eastern Continent. She and her shadow wolf partner are often a gallant image on the battlefield, though this might be hard to imagine from her small build and cute appearance. The way she flashes through the sky like a black bolt of lightning, exterminating her enemies before they even see her coming, is truly that of a “Black Meteor.” As an aside, she has a severe brother complex, and Kelvin-shi, in turn, has a severe sister complex and dotes on her heavily.

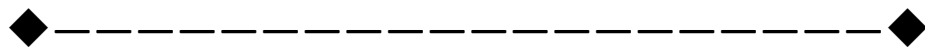
Shadow Wolf: “Heat Haze” Alex (Danger Ranking: E)

Alex-shi is a shadow wolf that Kelvin-shi brought under his employ through Summoning. Although his massive bulk and overbearing aura might give off a ferocious impression at first, he is actually extremely docile and considerate. He ends up looking even bigger than he is, as he is always right next to his partner, Rion-shi, who has a small build. He can appear and disappear seemingly in the

blink of an eye, making him as elusive as a “Heat Haze.” Does not actually use fire-elemental attacks.

※ Note that although the Danger Ranking of Kelvin-shi’s party members are generally on the low side, this assessment immediately shoots up to “S” as soon as something occurs that involves one of their companions or those they are close to. As such, we strongly advise caution while dealing with them and to not take these rankings at face value.

Relationship with Each Country...



The details in the directory were a weird blend of old and new information. For example, Rion and I were listed with our new family name—presumably because this would be released after the Naming Ceremony—but Efil’s race was still described as half-elf. There was no telling if this was because there were too many edits and not enough time or if the guild did not have knowledge of our most recent updates. I did have Rank S Concealment constantly applied to the Status of everyone in my party, after all.

That said, there is a part that I very much want to protest. Being called “Battle Junkie” is fine—it’s the truth, after all. But aren’t “Philanderer” and “War Poet” going way too far?! I’m not a philanderer; I’m a very loyal lover! My love is split several ways, that’s all! And the person who wrote this definitely visited the Village of Elves in person to gather info, even going to the trouble of crossing the elves’ barrier! After all, the battle at the village is the only instance when I did something cringey enough to merit being called “War Poet”!

Rion was elated. “Wow, there’s just as much info on us as there is on Sylvie! Alex, look, look, isn’t this drawing of you just so cute?!”

“Arf?”

“And the illustration of you is simply heavenly, Rion. The person who wrote this sure understands the greatness of my grandchildren!” cried Gerard.

Heyyyy, is no one gonna comment on what was said about me? Wait, do you guys actually agree with those nicknames?!

“Master, this makes public the fact that you are a Summoner. Is that not a problem?”

Ange raised her glass and answered before I could. “Ah, I asked Kelvin for permission beforehand. He said that he’d actually prefer for word to spread about his class.”

Oh, right, I do remember her asking me something along those lines. I had no idea she was working on something like this directory at the time, though.

“At the start, you said you wanted to hide it because you didn’t want to draw undue attention, right, honey? What’s brought this change in attitude?”

“Part of it is because I already used Summoning in front of so many people in Trycen, but the main reason is that I’m hoping this draws the good quests our way. You know how all the monsters have dropped in strength ever since the Demon Lord went down, right? Unfortunately, that means the number of Rank S monsters has dropped significantly.”

The world suffered a terrible loss indeed.

“Aha ha ha, Kelvin, that’s supposed to be a *good* thing.”

“Shush, Ange. It’s unfortunate for me. And, well, I was originally worried about all the commotion that would arise from countries trying to headhunt me, but the guild’s helping me deflect all that now. So I thought I might as well take the opportunity to get my name out there.”

I had, of course, also made arrangements with the guild so that I would be notified first when information about powerful subjugation targets popped up. *With this, I’m going to get flooded with requests! Or at least, I hope so. But I know to keep my expectations in check.*

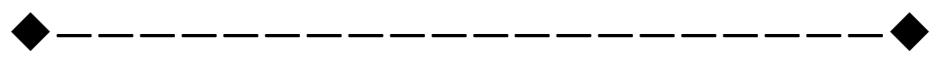
In any case, my top priority at the moment was to forget all the unnecessary info that the directory had included. *Oh, that’s right, I can just drink it all away!*

“Okay, let’s drink!” I said. “I suddenly really feel like drinking!”

“That’s a strange thing to hear from you, Kelvin. But in that case, I’ll pour you a cup!”

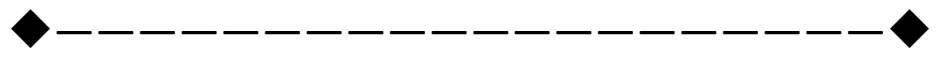
“Uh...make sure to not accidentally have some yourself, okay?”

Just as I was standing up to go have fun, however, a figure sidled up to the directory laying on the table, mumbling, “If it includes information on famous adventurers, then it must say something about Prettia-chan too!”



Rank S Adventurer: “Peach Ogre” Goldiana Prettiana (Danger Ranking: S)

Major Achievements...



“No, you don’t need to see it.”

“Hey, old man, you can’t keep the information all to yourself! That’s not fair!”

Dahak and Gerard struggled over the directory, the former wanting to read more and the latter adamant about keeping it shut. The fight between them continued for quite a while.



It was now late at night and the crowd of customers in the restaurant we were in was starting to thin. Sabato and Goma had returned to the castle, and Ange had headed off to her own inn. I was thinking about us making our way back as well, but...

“You ’ear me? *Hic!* I’mma win! So ’eave i’ ta me!”

Sera rambled on with a heavy tongue, slamming her cup on the table repeatedly. Her left hand had snaked around my arm in a vise so tight, my bones were creaking and Danger Detection was raising a ruckus inside my mind.

“Gerard, you—”

“No, no, no! I did not let her drink even a drop! She became like this from the smell alone!”

“At’s right, I dint drink a’ all!”

Allowing Gerard to sit next to Sera had been the point where everything had gone wrong. Unlike my preferred drinks, Gerard favored very strong liquors. The fumes from the fire wine he was downing had apparently been enough to

tip Sera over the edge.

“So, we learned today that Sera can get drunk without actually drinking. Gerard, you are now forbidden from drinking alcohol near her from today onward.”

“My king?!”

“Wha’re you sayin’? Are you no’ drinkin’ the wine I pour fo’ you?”

Clearly, conversation was no longer even possible. For some reason, even though Sera could control her strength so as to not break the cup in her hand, she was using her full strength on me.

“Master, Shutola-sama and Ruka have both fallen asleep. May we bring them back to the inn?” Ellie asked, approaching me with Ruka on her back. Behind her stood Rosalia, who was carrying Shutola, and Huba, who was holding Shutola’s teddy bear.

“Is it already that late? All right, go on ahead. We’ll follow after Sera calms down. Do you know how to get back?”

“Yes, Master. I made sure to learn the way beforehand. Efil-sama, may we be excused?”

“Mh-hm, go on. We will be fine here. Rest up properly.”

“Oh? Would it not be dangerous for several women to walk alone this late at night? My king, I will—”

“You are staying here, Gerard. Even with Herculean Strength, my Strength stat is still much lower than Sera’s. You’re part of the reason this happened, so you’ll be taking responsibility by helping me out. Preferably before my arm is torn off.”

“Whaaat?! But, my king!”

“No buts!”

Gerard sounded very unwilling, but my arm had, as of that moment, taken more than it could stand.

“Um, Master, I’ve been hearing very distinct cracking sounds for a while... Are

you sure you don't need us to stay to help out in some way?"

"Don't worry about it, Ellie. Both Mel and I have Rank S White Magic. As long as I bear the pain, I'll be—*hng!*—fine." *It's not my first day being Sera's lover.*

"Then I'll go with Ellie and the others to protect them, Kel-nii. Hak-chan, come with us."

"Huh, me too? As a guy, shouldn't I stay here to—"

"Dahak, go with Rion. You're not quite strong enough yet to help with peeling Sera off me. Worst case, you might die attempting it."

Rion shared my stiff smile. "Hak-chan, Sera-nee doesn't know how to hold back when she's drunk. Let's leave it to Gramps and Mel-nee. If you try to get involved but aren't strong enough, getting hurt would be the least of your worries."

"What're you two saying?! Even I—"

"Whaaat ish this? Are you tryin' to take my Kelfin away fro' me, Dahak?"

"What?!"

Although she didn't sound serious with her words so slurred, the killing intent that she was emanating showed she meant business. My glass quivered and shattered, sending fragments flying all over. It was faint, but there was a distinctly red tinge creeping into Sera's eyes.

"Looks like I'm gonna have to pay for this," I sighed. "But Dahak, you get it now, right?"

"Y-Yes, sir. G-Good luck, brother."

Dahak finally seemed to get the message, agreeing to leave with Rion and the maids.

"Sera, that's enough! Get off my king!" Gerard said sternly, trying to pull the demon away.

Sera, however, clung to me even tighter. "Nooooo! I'm gonna sleep wi' 'im tonight!"

"No, you aren't. It's Efil and Rion's turn tonight," Mel admonished her. "You

have to stick to the agreement we made with each other.”

“Waaaahhhh!” Sera wailed.

“Oh no, Master’s arm is all bent again!” Efil cried, hovering worriedly. “Sera-san, please control yourself!”

Clearly we were going to need quite a bit more time to settle things on our end. *The last time I felt like this was during Mel’s hellish training. As in, god this is really painful. Ha ha ha, I’m in trouble. I’ve been maintaining a poker face thanks to Nerves of Steel, but I think it’s about to crack.*

“Okay then, we’re heading back first, Kel-nii. Good night.”

“Good night. Be careful out there.”

“Aha ha ha... I hope you manage to break out soon.”

“Trust me, I’m doing my best.”

After bidding us farewell, Rion’s group left the restaurant.

All right, it’s now a do-or-die situation for me. I very much want to avoid having to drop out of the Beast King Festival due to being injured directly beforehand!

CRACK! SNAP! CRACK!

I very, very much want to avoid it...

Please.



The night was growing deeper, but with the Beast King Festival so close, the streets of the capital city were filled with people. Ellie and Ruka led the way towards the inn, followed by Shutola and her vigilant guards, Rosalia and Huba.

Four maids with remarkable features walking around at this time of night were bound to draw attention. Add two more cute girls to the mix, one with black hair and one with blonde, and the effect was multiplied several times. Several men made to approach the group with less than savory intentions but then turned right back around as soon as they saw Dahak’s large figure and frightening face.

“Still, if things continue like this, won’t Master end up dead one of these days?”

“You’re worrying too much, Hu-chan. Sera-nee’s apparently been like that since before I even knew her, so I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Uh, m’lady, any normal person would worry. Brother’s arm was literally bent in the opposite direction!”

“He was repeatedly being healed right after getting hurt. Is that not a form of torture in and of itself— Oh?” Rosalia cut herself off as Shutola, who had been sleeping on her back, groaned a little and lifted her head, cracking open bleary eyes. “Did I wake you up? I apologize, Shutola-sama. Please wait a while longer. We are currently heading to the inn.”

“Inn? This is...the main road? Mmmm, let’s take the shortcut...”

Shutola’s suggestion seemed to come from a desire to crawl into a warm bed as soon as possible. However, this city was unfamiliar to all of them, and Ellie had only memorized one path. She did not know any shortcuts.

“Shutola-sama, I apologize as well. I only know the way along this main avenue —”

“That way...”

Just as Ellie was in the middle of apologizing to the princess on Rosalia’s back, the girl in question sleepily pointed towards a specific alley as if indicating that they should turn off that way.

“Um, Shutola-sama?”

“Shortcut... Rion-chan showed me...map...yesterday...”

“It’s true, we did look at— Wait, you memorized the whole thing?!”

“Mm...”

The day before they set off, Rion and Shutola had pored over a rather detailed tourist map of the city of Gaun, which had shown even the smaller roads. However, it was only for about ten minutes, and they had been chatting about where they wanted to go or what they wanted to eat the whole time. Being the capital of the country of Gaun, the city naturally dwarfed Parth in size. Shutola’s

claim implied that she had memorized every detail of the city within those ten minutes.

“I think this every now and again, but Shutola-chan really is a genius,” Rion murmured.

“It was rumored back in Trycen that the Intelligence stat points of all the siblings might have gone to her,” Huba chortled, earning a disapproving glare from Rosalia.

“Huba, watch your words. Not that I would refute what you just said. Rumors aside, it is true that Shutola-sama could go head-to-head with the Oracle of Deramis. When she was young, she went on exchange to an academy on the Western Continent and completed what was normally a five-year course in a single year. That was when she and the Oracle grew close.”

“So, you mean she basically skipped grades?” Rion asked. “I can’t even dream of that, although I would like to try attending that school.”

Due to being frail and sickly in her previous life, Rion had never fully experienced what it was like to go to school. As a result, she yearned for it.

“Well, let’s trust the girlie and take the shortcut!”

“Sleepy...”

The group turned off the main road and walked into the alleyway.



“We actually got back,” Dahak exclaimed in surprise.

“And in no time at all,” Rion added.

Five minutes after weaving through the alleys following Shutola’s instructions, the group found themselves safely back at their inn. The walk that was supposed to take twenty minutes had been shortened significantly.

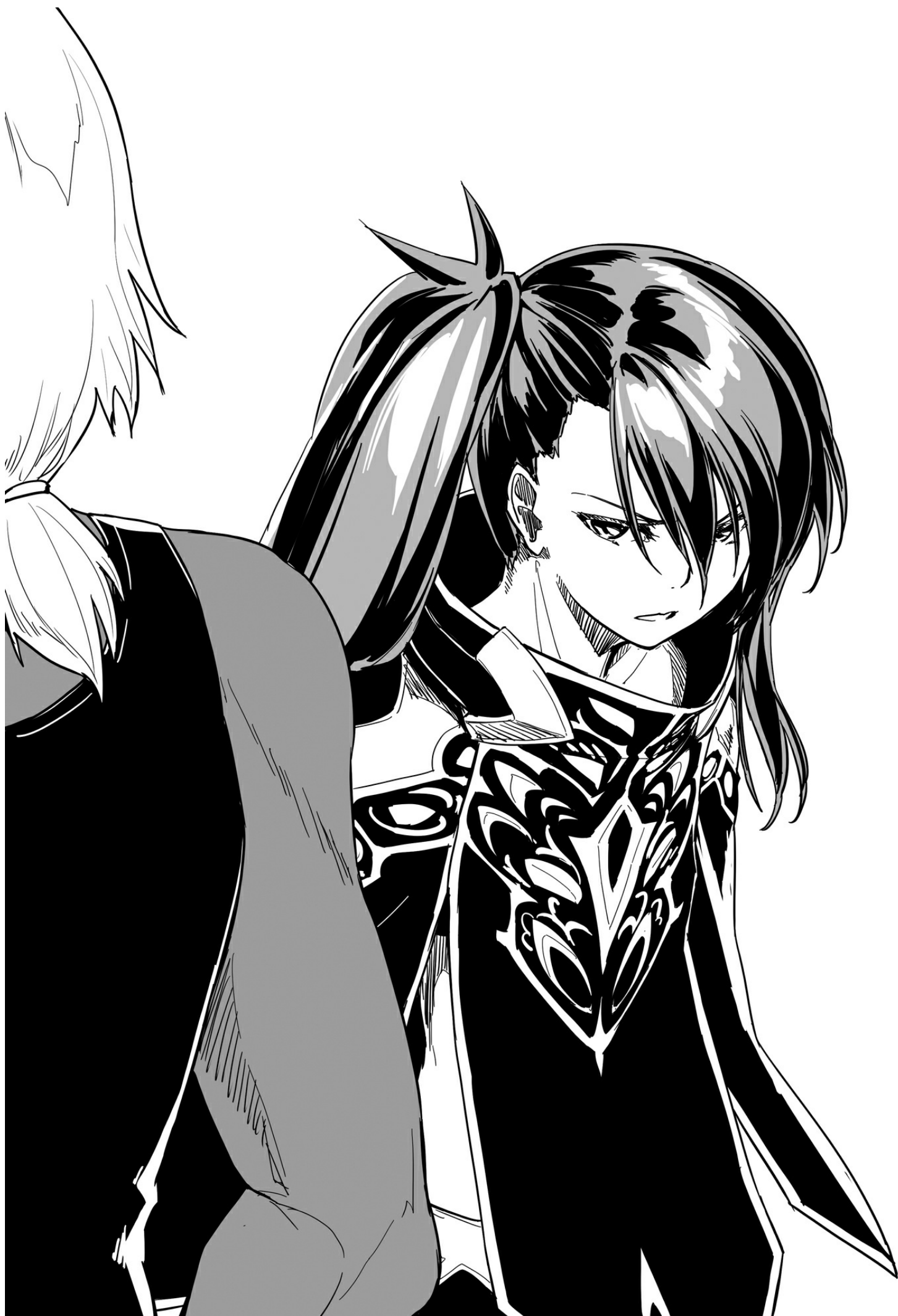
“Mmm...zzz...”

“Oh dear, it looks like Shutola-sama has fallen back asleep.”

“Kay, let’s head on in— Whoa!”

As Dahak walked backwards, facing Rion and the others, he accidentally

bumped into someone. She stumbled back a few steps, then slowly turned around to glare at him. It was a young girl around Rion's height with very graceful features. Even while glaring, her almond-shaped eyes looked very cute.



“How about you look properly when you walk, huh? Are those needlessly sharp eyes of yours for show?”

“Huh?! Where were *you* look—”

Just as Dahak was about to step up to accept the fight the girl was picking, Rion interrupted him. “Stop it, Hak-chan! We’re the ones in the wrong!” She then turned to the other girl. “We’re very sorry about what happened!”

Reading the atmosphere, the maids standing behind her bowed deeply in apology.

“Hmph. Just be careful next time,” the girl said sourly before disappearing into an alley, her long, fire-red hair trailing after her.

“Gah, what was *with* that girl? Could she *be* any ruder?! She might be super cute, but I hate those types!”

“Hak-chan, as I said, we were in the wrong too. And that girl...”

“What?”

“Mm...never mind. Come on, let’s head inside. Looks like Shutola-chan’s at the end of her rope.”

As everyone filed into the inn, Rion shot one last look at the alley the girl had entered. She was no longer in sight, of course. During their brief encounter, however, Rion had felt it. *That girl was super strong. If I didn’t stop him, Hak-chan might have been in trouble.*

What Rion had felt was the unmistakable aura of someone with overwhelming power.

Chapter 3: Beast King Festival

“Ladies and gentlemen, the day is finally upon us! Today is the great annual tournament hosted here at the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena, the tournament that sends the beastly instincts of every last citizen of Gaun roaring with anticipation: the Beast! King! FESTIVAL! WE’RE STARTING!”

Thunderous cheering shook the very foundations of the coliseum. Even we could hear it loud and clear, despite being at the food court outside. I recognized the voice; it belonged to Ronove, the same person who had commentated on my exhibition match with Sylvia. I understood it was part of her job description to get the audience pumped up, but there was one thing that confused me.

“Uh...there’s still more than an hour before the tournament actually starts, right? Aren’t the commentator and audience both getting ahead of themselves?”

“There are exhibition matches starting now,” Ange replied, looking through a guidebook to the Beast King Festival that she had picked up somewhere. “They’re sort of an opening act, it looks like. It says here that this is the place for those who failed to get into the actual tournament to show off what they can do. Are you interested in seeing it? Wanna go?”

“Mm... Nah, I’m good.”

“Kay.”

If they failed to get into the tournament, it means they’re probably weaker than even the Gaunian soldiers Ruka beat the other day. Doesn’t sound like it’d be worth the trouble.

Over the past few days, my companions and I had fully enjoyed ourselves sightseeing in the capital city. But as they say, time flies when you’re having fun, and before we knew it, it was already the day of the Beast King Festival. As always, we were still empty-handed, as all our luggage, including the souvenirs

we bought, was safely inside Clotho's Storage.

"I'm starting to get a little worried now," Rion said. "I've only played around since getting here. I hope I haven't gotten rusty."

Ange laughed wryly. "It's true the other contestants are all doing this in top condition. When you put it that way, I'm kinda worried about all of you too. Well, since we're gathered here, should we go over the details of the Beast King Festival one last time?"

"Sounds good; we have just enough time," I agreed. "First, as for who's participating in the tournament..."

When I turned towards the other three, munching on a piece of meat that was similar to a frankfurter, they leaped up.

"That'd be me!" cried Rion, followed by Sera's "'Tis I!" and Dahak bringing up the rear with "I'm ready to rumble!"

For some reason, they all adopted a weird pose. I knew that Sera and Rion had had trouble falling asleep last night, as if they were grade school kids before a school trip, which probably explained their strange mood.

Ah, Rion, you still have a morsel on your cheek. Come over here, quickly, before Gerard does something bizarre to you.

"After talking it over, we've decided it should be Rion, Sera, Dahak, and me."

"I did expect Efil-chan to step down, but Gerard-san and Mel-san too?"

"I value the time I get to spend with Ruka and Shutola. This way, I can wholeheartedly cheer for Rion too. That is why I am giving this opportunity a pass."

So you say, but you couldn't participate even if you wanted to, right? It's great that you can swap out your equipment now thanks to Self-Transcendence, but the rules of this tournament require you to use their tournament-issued gear, and they don't have full-faced helmets. Your weird Way of the Knight won't let you show your bare face in public, right?

"Cheering everyone on from the stands with one hand while holding food in my other suits me better. There are still so many dishes I haven't tried yet!"

How many stalls do you plan on eating out of stock?

“Master, here is the rule book for the tournament.”

“Noooo, Efil-chan! That was my job!”

As Ange protested beside me, half on the verge of tears, Efil handed me a pamphlet that she had received from reception. It was a simple rundown of the rules for the Beast King Festival.

You may only wear gear chosen from the options prepared by the tournament committee beforehand, with the exception of one accessory of your choice. The usage of any other item is forbidden.

The use of magic is forbidden during matches, but the use of Unique Skills is allowed. The barrier surrounding the stage will differentiate between the two, turning red when magic is used.

A barrier has been erected around the stage to protect the audience, but any attempt to harm the audience will be considered foul play and grounds for disqualification. Depending on the case, it might even be treated as a crime with legal repercussions.

You win once your opponent can no longer fight—this includes being dead—or has surrendered. If your opponent dies, you will be fined.

The total participants in the tournament are the sixty-four who managed to secure a slot through the preliminaries or by being seeded. The pairings will be decided on the day of by drawn lots.

“The ones that we really gotta look out for are numbers one and two.”

“It’s only thanks to the exception in the first rule that I’m able to participate. ‘Cause of my hair clip.”

Sera’s physical characteristics as a demon—her horns, wings, and tail—were hidden by her hair clip. As such, she generally could not take it off in public. If the tournament had forbidden participants from using any and all accessories, she would have become ineligible. However, this did still leave her at a disadvantage. Rion, Dahak, and I could bring our Goddess’s Rings, which granted us resistance against debuffs. Its very presence was a game changer.

Similarly, the other participants were bound to equip other accessories with equally useful abilities. The fact that Sera could not do the same automatically left her starting off on the back foot.

“Huh? Your hair clip has a special function, Sera-san?”

“What? No, of course it doesn’t. It’s, uh...something I have a lot of emotional attachment to. So that’s why I don’t want to take it off! Like, ever!”

“It’s the very first thing I ever gave you, right, Sera?”

“R-Right, that’s it! That’s exactly why!”

“If you say so...”

Although Sera looked slightly flustered, Ange did not press the matter.

Be careful what you say when Ange’s with us, Sera. We’re keeping your race a secret, after all.

::Ugh, sorry....::

In this case, we managed to gloss it over, so it’s fine.

Ange seemed to have lost interest in the topic and was distracted by something. I took the opportunity to get the conversation back on track.

“So, everyone, make your own decisions about what accessory you’ll bring onto the stage. Use whatever you want. Now, about rule number two, remember you can’t use magic *during* matches. Got it?”

“*During* matches, right, Kel-nii? Got it!”

Anyone quick on the uptake would have noticed immediately that there was a loophole with the second rule. It forbade the use of magic during matches, but it basically meant that the use of magic was allowed outside of matches. For example, using magic to buff oneself immediately before a match was technically not against the rule. On the surface, the Beast King Festival seemed like a chance for meatheads to simply slug it out, but the truth was that there were ways for the crafty to get a leg up as well.

“My, oh my! I *thought* I recognized that handsome figure! Kelvin-chan, how’ve you been! Oh gosh, Gerard-sama’s here too!”

“What?! The man you’re chasing is here, dear sister?! Which one is he?!”

Gerard almost leaped out of his seat in response. Understandable, as I also recognized that distinctive manner of speech and the deep voice behind our backs.

There’s no doubt—it can only be that person. But hold on, did I just hear two voices?

“Prettia-chan, it’s been a wh—?!”

“I-Indeed, you appear to be in good he—?!”

Our words died in our mouths as we turned around.

“Hiiii!”

“Hi there!”

Standing before us was Prettia in his characteristic pink dress beside a bald man who was dressed up in what looked like English aristocratic gentlemanly attire. The latter had muscles that seemed about to burst through his clothes, although they weren’t as massive as Prettia’s. Going by appearance alone, he was several times easier on the eyes. However, his manner of speech was the same as Prettia’s and, for some reason, the two were making a heart by putting their hands together.

What’s that meant to be? A mental attack on Gerard? I’m not connected with him through the Network right now, but I am one hundred percent sure he’s thinking the exact thing I am: Prettia’s multiplied! So, uh, is this person also going to be participating in today’s tournament?

“Who’s that handsome piece of shit?! Why’s he getting so touchy-feely with Prettia-chan?!”

Ah, Dahak’s shocked too. In his own way.

“Rosaliaaaa, I can’t see anythingggg. Why’re you covering my eyes?”

“You must not look, Shutola-sama. You are too pure and innocent to see this just yet.”

Good call, Rosalia!



“Hmm, I know this happens every year, but that is quite the impressive lineup yet again.”

“You’re the one who went around calling out to them, father. Kelvin and his group did not even have the right to participate originally.”

The special box reserved for royalty, commanding a sweeping view of the entire coliseum, was currently occupied by Leonhart Gaun, the Beast King of Gaun, and his eldest son, Jereol Gaun. While the former looked proud of himself, the latter was all sighs. He was the one among his siblings who had the most dealings with their father, an arrangement which gave him proportionally as many headaches. Today, the Beast King was adopting the appearance of Risa, Jereol’s wife.

“They would have gotten participation slots anyway, even if I hadn’t done anything. It wouldn’t take all that much probing to find out that the right to participate can be seized from someone else.”

“We don’t officially sanction it, though.”

There were two ways to take part in the Beast King Festival. First, everyone who made the top eight the previous year was automatically given a slot. Second, coming out victorious in the preliminaries. The Gaunian military, which was organizing the event, also had several slots reserved for itself that normally were not supposed to be handed out to non-military personnel, much less outsiders like Kelvin and his party members. As such, the arrangement that Leonhart had made was a rare exception.

Everyone who was acknowledged as having the strength to participate in the tournament was given a ticket that symbolized their eligibility. If a contestant lost that ticket, they would be barred from the tournament, even if they were recognized as one of the winners from the preliminaries. Conversely, anyone who held a ticket could participate, even if no one knew who they were. In other words, protecting one’s ticket was part of the qualification process.

Every year, an endless number of people attacked the confirmed contestants in the days leading up to the event, but most of them would be handily beaten and arrested by the guards on patrol. Though not officially endorsed, in this

country, which valued strength above all else, it could be said that the backdoor way of gaining entry to the tournament was actually encouraged in an indirect way.

“Think about it, Jereol. If Kelvin was to proactively make a move, worst case, he might have gathered enough tickets for *all* his party members. As a country, we were able to save face by giving up only four slots. It’s a low price to pay.”

“Father, you don’t sound very convincing spouting such a reasonable justification while doing calculations with your abacus.”

Despite having been called out, the Beast King’s fingers continued flicking the beads of his abacus back and forth furiously. By now, however, Jereol knew better than to expect his father to listen when he complained.

“The roster of contestants has changed significantly from the list of those who won the preliminaries, hasn’t it? Heh heh heh, could some of the new faces turn out to be dark horses?”

“What are you even expecting, father? Good grief. But you are right that there are a few new faces here and there among the regulars.”

The country’s reputation was indeed on Jereol’s mind, as he was the crown prince and all, but his biggest worry at the moment was Sabato and Goma, whose eligibility for receiving the Gaun royal family name was on the line during this tournament. Even he would have to stay on his toes during the matches, so he wondered whether his two younger siblings would be able to properly display what they were capable of among so many larger-than-life figures duking it out. Jereol was actually quite considerate of his siblings.

“By the way, father... Why did you choose to look like Risa today?”

“It’s a treat for you. Obviously. Here, does this get you excited? You wanna cop a feel?”

Jereol’s face clouded over. As it turned out, he was currently in the middle of a huge spat with his wife. She had even refused to see him off when he had left the house that morning.



“So, what’d you guys get?” I asked.

The four of us who were participating in the tournament had just stopped by reception with our tickets and done the drawing that would decide who we’d be facing in the first round. True to its name as the largest event in the country, the tournament went so far as to assign each of us our very own waiting room. Rion, Sera, Dahak, and I were currently gathered in my room to share the results of the draw.

“Um, hold on, Kel-nii. Mine says...B-2 right here.”

“I’m C-1!” Sera stated.

“Mine is D-14, brother.”

“And I’m A-8,” I finished. “Wow, we somehow managed to all be in different blocks.”

“Phew, I’m so glad we don’t have to bump each other off early on. Kel-nii, Sera-nee, Hak-chan, I’ll see you all in the finals!”

The Beast King Festival involved a total of sixty-four contestants facing each other in tournament brackets. We were all split into one of four blocks that were labeled A, B, C, and D, and the top four from each block would be brought together at the end for the finals. All of us belonging to different blocks meant that we could work our way up our respective blocks without having to worry about bumping into each other. If things went well, we could all make it to the finals. I could not help but suspect that Sera’s Luck stat had been at least partially behind this fortuitous development.

“Don’t let your guard down, m’lady,” Dahak warned. “Prettia-chan and that baldie are out there somewhere.”

I nodded. “Dahak has a point. Aside from Prettia, the Beast King and upper officers of the Gaunian army are also participating. And some of the other participants may be really strong too, regardless of whether they are famous or not. Stay sharp no matter whom you’re facing.”

“Kelvin, you’re already grinning,” Sera pointed out.

“I mean...this *is* exciting.” *There’s just no suppressing this urge. I’m already*

trying to be as patient as possible.

“I’m sure brother will do just fine. But I mean, how much easier would it be if all the contestants were like the small fry that have been attacking us the past few days?!”

“Oh, right, now that you mention it, what was with those guys, anyway? They all tried to sneak up on us in broad daylight inside the city, but it didn’t feel like they were trying to steal anything.”

Sera tilted her head quizzically. “And the Gaunian soldiers stood there watching until we beat them up. Was it actually a part of the festivities?”

“Who knows. Maybe it was the Beast King being generous and sending us reminders not to shirk our training in the interim.” *What a considerate guy he is. I guess you can’t judge people by how they look. Uh, not that I know how he actually looks.*

“Aha ha ha,” Rion laughed. “The only exercise I got while sightseeing were those incidents. I’m kind of scared to step on a scale right now.”

“I get what you mean,” I said. “Because of Mel, I’ve eaten way too much lately.”

“That’s ’cause you two only ate meat. Eat vegetables too! Veggies are good for you!” Dahak interjected.

“I absolutely get what all of you mean. My clothes have been getting tight in the chest area recently.”

“Sera-nee, I’m pretty sure you’re talking about something else entirely...”

Rion looked between Sera’s chest and her own, placed her hands on hers, and hung her head.

Sera is still growing?!



The seats of the coliseum were filled to the brim with cheering spectators. The last of the exhibition matches that served as an opener had just ended, and the start of the true Beast King Festival was drawing closer by the minute. The excitement in the air was climbing higher and higher still, reaching a fever pitch.

“Would you like another cup of green tea, Mel-san?”

“I just happened to be getting thirsty. How could you tell? Thank you, Efil.”

“Could you pour me some too, lass?”

“Is there no limit to how thoughtful you are, Efil-chan?! So, um...can I have seconds too?”

In sharp contrast, Ange and the members of Kelvin’s party who weren’t participating in the tournament were currently relaxing in a private viewing box. All the contestants had been assigned a VIP room to seat those they were bringing along, and this one was Kelvin’s. It was large enough for Alex to comfortably sleep in and even had several dedicated chefs. Even now, a waiter was busy carrying food over from the kitchen. And although this world did not have air conditioners, Mel was using Blue Magic to keep the room nice and cool.

“Thank you for waiting.”

Dishes that absolutely dazzled the eye were lined up on the table from end to end. Although the taste was somewhat inferior to Efil’s cooking, it was still considered top-class. Even Shutola, whose tongue was accustomed to food cooked for royals, approved of the quality.

“Waiter, excuse me. We’re ordering again. Where’s the menu? Ah, right. So, from here...to here. Give me three of everything. Also, can you arrange for someone to go to the stalls outside and bring me a few recommendations? I guess...ten would do.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am. As soon as possible.”

In point of fact, this was the only room that had been assigned personal chefs. It was the Beast King’s countermeasure against Melfina eating everything in the stalls outside the coliseum. For the chefs who now had to bear the brunt of the gluttonous goddess’s appetite, it was the start of a long, long day of hell.

“Oh, they’re announcing the tournament brackets!” Shutola exclaimed, prompting everyone else to stop their conversations and turn their eyes towards the stage. Even Melfina put down her chopsticks and gave Ronove her attention.

“Thank you for the wait! We are now announcing the tournament brackets!”



Ronove must have been using the mic-like item we had seen back in Parth. Even though she was doing her announcements on the stage up above, we could hear her clearly in my waiting room. She was currently going through the pairings in alphanumerical order, so she announced my matchup first.

“Fourth match in Block A: Wild Beast Style Swordsmanship instructor, Roman! Versus! Rank S adventurer, ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin!”

Uh...who’s that? I’m paired with some dude who teaches a sword style?

“What’s Wild Beast Style, brother?”

“Haven’t the foggiest. But the word ‘swordsmanship’ is there, so I guess my opponent will be using a sword?”

“Shutola-chan might know. Oh, right. Gramps should be sticking close to her. Want me to try asking through the Network?”

“That’s a good idea, Rion. Yes, please.”

About ten seconds later, Rion nodded to herself, murmuring, “Right, I see.”

Wow, she already got an answer? Gerard sure is reliable for things like this. He always does everything at full throttle when it involves one of “his grandchildren.”

“Turns out, they were also talking about this on their end. Wild Beast Style is a school of swordsmanship developed by a beastkin who learned the sword in Toraj. And Roman is a master of the style who’s even been elected as their next generation headmaster.”

“A master swordsman...”

Now I’m curious about how strong he really is. If he’s been confirmed to be the school’s next-generation headmaster, that should mean he’s strong, right? Well, doesn’t matter. I’ll stay vigilant either way.

Ronove continued announcing the names of the other Block A contestants, but “Jereol Gaun” was the only one that I recognized.

Which reminds me, I didn't catch the name of the "gentleman" Prettia brought with him. Gerard rushed us so much that we entered the coliseum before I had a chance to ask.

"First match in Block B: Rank B adventurer, Gonzales! Versus! Kelvin's party member, 'Black Meteor' Rion!"

Oh? Rion's going first in Block B. Oof, I feel bad for her opponent.

"Uhhh...m'lady, this is still only the first match. Just think of it as a throwaway match."

"Hak-chan, it'd be rude to my opponent if I fought him with an attitude like that! As Kel-nii said, I won't let my guard down, no matter whom I'm facing. I'll always use my full strength!"

Uh, Rion, using your full strength without first gauging your opponent's strength is a no-no. Gonzales-san is going to be reduced to dust. We'll get slapped with a fine.

"That's the right mindset, Rion! But make sure to properly assess your opponent's strength and go easy on him as much as needed. Just like how I do it."

"Sera, what you're saying makes perfect sense, but do you remember who it was who wrung me like a wet towel the first night of this trip?"

"The first night? Did something happen? For some reason, I can't recall what happened that night."

Yeeeah, it's okay. I don't expect you to. Sera never remembers what she did when she wakes up after getting drunk. And she always feels terrible with a hangover after nights like that, so I can never bring myself to be too hard on her. Oh, hey, Ronove's done announcing the Block B pairings.

"So, the people we know in Block B, aside from Rion, are Leonhart, Yujil, and Sabato. That's quite a lot of the Gaunian royalty all clumped together."

"Which means I'll eventually get to fight the Beast King if things go smoothly. All right! Kel-nii, I'll do my best!"

"I'm sure you've got it! Let's meet at the finals. And now, it's Block C being

announced.”

Sera’s number is C-1, so she should be called right off the bat.

“First match of Block C: Kelvin’s party member, ‘Empress’ Sera! Versus! Hundred-man commander of Gaun, Guin!”

“Guin”? Is this the same Guin who’s in Sabato’s party?

“Looks like your opponent is Guin, sister Sera.”

“Ahh, that guy? He’s technically a Rank A adventurer, right? He was with us when we invaded Trycen, but I only remember him running around. Is he actually strong?”

“He commands a force of a hundred men, according to the announcement. I imagine that would make him about as strong as the officers Ruka fought in the castle. I haven’t really had the chance to see Guin fight in person, so I can’t say for sure.”

“Hm...that doesn’t tell me a whole lot. Well, if he’s in Sabato’s party, I’ll assume he’s as tough as Sabato is! Which means he shouldn’t die too easily!”

What happened to all that talk about gauging your opponent’s strength?!



Sabato’s party was currently gathered in his waiting room. He, Goma, Akgas, and Guin were doing exactly what Kelvin’s group was doing: confirming their match opponents. Of the four, one was on the floor in the so-called “orz” position.

“I’m so dead... Of all the participants on the roster, why did my very first match have to be with Sera-san?”

“Ha ha ha! What’re you saying, Guin? I’m in the same block as my old man! Unlike me, you get to fight such a cute beauty! You lucky dog, you!” Sabato pounded Guin’s back, cackling loudly as if to dispel the other man’s distress.

“Ow! OW! That hurts, Sabato-sama!”

“I’m surprised to see you so down about it, Guin. Normally, you’d be raising both hands in joy, just like Sabato is saying. You do remember how stunningly

beautiful Sera-san is, right? What's happened to you? Are you sick?"

"Guin, lad, if you're feeling sick, you should say so. You're...you, but you're still one of those representing Gaun in this tournament. Don't give our country a bad name."

The others were merciless in dogpiling on Guin.

"You're being really mean, Goma-sama and Akgas-san! Of course I want to look forward to this! If I'm lucky, I might even get a quick cop of those jiggy, bountiful boobies! Her alias of 'Empress' also kind of speaks to m—"

"Lad, you're a terrible person. You know that, right?"

"You're the enemy of all women."

The others were *very* merciless in dogpiling on Guin.

"Ha ha! Being honest to yourself is what it means to be a man!"

"Ughhh...Sabato-sama, you're my one and only ally! Wait, no, that's not what I wanted to say. Sera-san wiped out the hordes of dragons in the Grand Scarlet Canyon as handily as twisting a baby's arm, right? She also charged into Trycen Castle when the Demon Lord was still at large and took down everyone maintaining the barrier all by herself! If I fight her, I'll be turned into a pulp, *if I'm lucky!*"

Although Goma and Akgas could see where Guin was coming from, his prior comments had left them in no mood to pity him. In fact, they even thought he could do with a little pain in hopes that it would help to straighten his character out a little, and their cold gazes reflected their feelings.

While the group was traveling throughout the land as part of their training, these two had often found themselves saddled with resolving problems caused by Guin thoughtlessly acting on his ulterior motives. In contrast to Touya, one of the Heroes of Deramis, who caused trouble without ever intending to, every single trouble caused by Guin had been triggered by an intentional choice on his part.

"A pulp? But with your speed, don't you think you have a sliver of a chance? All you want is a single cop, after all. Right?"

Twitch.

“What do you think you’re saying, Sabato?!”

“Hmm, Sabato-sama does have a point, Goma-sama. Considering how fast Guin can accelerate from rest, he just might be able to pull it off. And in a fight, these things...just happen.”

Twitch. Twitch.

“Y-You too, Akgas?!”

Goma raised her trembling fist, glaring at her two companions. Seeing that, Sabato threw out his hands in an effort to placate her. “You idiot! We’re saying this on purpose to get Guin motivated! He needs winding up or he can’t get serious!”

“Goma-sama, please take a look at Guin now. Although this method is somewhat deplorable, it is indeed effective on him.”

“RAAAAHHHH! I’M GONNA DO THIS! SHANGRI-LA IS WITHIN MY REACH!”

Guin’s eyes were filled with hope. It was a twisted hope, but hope nonetheless. When such aspirations were fueled, men became capable of drawing out much more power than they themselves thought possible. Unfortunately, such was the lot of men everywhere.

“When he’s in this state, Guin’s pretty strong, Goma.”

“Ugh, well, it’s not my business if he gets killed by Kelvin-san. Forget it. I’m going to focus on my own match.” Goma perked up her ears, hoping to catch the voice of the announcer. “The match announcements—”

“—and that is all the pairings for the tournament! Without further ado, we are moving straight on to the matches! Contestants in Block A, please move to...”

“Ha ha ha, it’s all over,” Sabato laughed teasingly.

“Grr, now you’ve gone and made me miss the rest of it!” Goma wailed, crumpling into the same pose Guin had taken not long ago, her cat ears folding back.

“Please rest assured, Goma-sama. I actually did write down all the pairings. Here is the info on your block, Block D.”

“Thank youuuu, Akgas!”

The piece of paper he was proffering had the names of all the contestants in Block D written on it. Surprisingly, the old veteran had a neat and orderly side to him. Goma was so touched by the gesture that she failed to notice, within the unnecessarily fancy handwriting, the names of Akgas, Dahak, and Goldiana near her own.



The arena filled with roaring and cheering as the matches in Block A kicked off. Every once in a while, the sound levels climbed multiple decibels, generating vibrations that reached even the waiting rooms underneath the stage. Was there an upset? Did a match just finish? Either way, the Beast King Festival was definitely heating up.

“That’s some incredible cheering going on up there. Did a match just finish?”

“If it did, the announcer lady would have called for me. She didn’t, which means the match is still going on.”

“R-Right, sir. I’m sorry for asking before thinking...”

Five beastkin men wearing dougi with the kanji characters for “Wild Beast Style” on the right chest were currently standing at attention, facing a sixth man who was sitting on the floor with his back leaning against the wall. This man, who had a sheathed sword propped up against his shoulder and wore a hairstyle that Kelvin would have recognized as similar to a sumo wrestler’s topknot, was none other than Roman, senior instructor of Wild Beast Style and Kelvin’s upcoming opponent. For his armor, he had selected the lightest outfit offered by the tournament organizers, and for his weapon, he had gone with a Toraj-made katana. It was clear from a glance that he was a speed-based fighter.

“You all look like you’re about to lose your minds. No, you look...afraid. What are you afraid of?”

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s just, when I think of whom you’ll be facing...”

The five men were all disciples of the school. Ever since Roman, the man who taught them the sword, had been confirmed as a participant in the Beast King Festival, they had been counting the days until they could witness his moment of glory on stage. Then everyone had changed their tune once the tournament brackets were announced.

“You mean Kelvin.”

“Yes, sir. He’s the talk of the town as the newest adventurer to reach Rank S. Last year, Goldiana barely managed a victory over the Beast King and took home the championship. They’re both Rank S adventurers too. I’m worried Kelvin is as strong as they are...”

“His name exploded into fame after the recent Demon Lord subjugation, but he had also accomplished many other feats before that. I heard he even beat Sylvia during his promotion exhibition match. He’s definitely going to be a formidable opponent.”

The disciples brought up rumors about Kelvin one after another. They were uneasy. Was this path they had dedicated themselves to really the right way? Could Roman, the embodiment of the strength promised by the teachings of their school, truly measure up against the real giants?

“Hmph. Are you satisfied with merely being a part of the Beast King Festival? Are we aiming only to get past round one or round two? Is that all we’re worth?”

“Th-That’s...”

“I ask you again, what is it we’re aiming for?”

“The tournament championship!” shouted one of the disciples with so much resolve it was as if he were giving voice to a cry from his very soul.

Roman nodded solemnly. “It doesn’t matter that Kelvin’s a Rank S adventurer. I hear his class is Summoner. Sure, he might be powerful if he’s using magic or Summoning, but he can’t in this tournament. At the end of the day, the only thing you can really believe in is your own body and the techniques you’ve developed. If you look at this situation from another perspective, you will realize this is actually a blessing in disguise. After I win against a Rank S

adventurer, the name of our school will resound to the heavens. What need is there to be frightened?!”

“That...is true. It is exactly as you say, sir!”

Hope changed to courage, and courage was contagious. No one in the waiting room held even a sliver of fear of Kelvin any longer.

“The crux of our style is to close in on our opponents before they can react and finish them off with the single greatest attack we can deliver. Short and decisive is how we win. There’s no time for petty tricks. And all you have to do is believe in me.”

Roman grabbed his katana and stood up. That same instant, the venue was rocked by another wave of cheering.

“The third match of Block A is now over! Winner: Dishu the wandering warrior elf! The mastery over the bow that he just showed us was absolutely amazing. What did you think, Kilto-sama?”

“When fighting one-on-one as an archer, maintaining a certain distance from your opponent is key. And he managed to do just that *and* make it look easy. I’m sure we can keep our expectations up for his other fights.”

“Thank you for the comment! And it’s time for the next match! Contestants for the fourth match of Block A, Roman-sama and Kelvin-sama, please make your way up to the stage!”

As his disciples perked up their ears to listen to the announcement, Roman slipped through their line and headed for the exit, his figure emanating poise and confidence.

“Looks like my time’s come. Well, I’m off. Cheer me on.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Godspeed!”

Reflected in the eyes of the disciples was the gallant figure of a samurai heading off to the battlefield.



“It just occurred to me, but are you not going to participate, Kilto-sama? Jereol-sama and Yujil-sama did last year and are doing so again this year.”

“Unlike my brothers, I am not the physical type. Under the rules of this tournament, which ban the use of magic, there is no way for me to win.”

Ronove, who was emceeing, and Kilto Gaun, whose job was to break the plays down for the audience, exchanged lively conversation from the commentator’s box, filling the empty air while waiting for the contestants of the fourth match to make their way to the stage.

“Going by that logic, won’t Kelvin-sama have a tough time in the next match? He may be a Rank S adventurer, but his fighting style is based on magic, isn’t it?”

“That’s why I’ve really been looking forward to this one, as a fellow adherent to the path of magic. Oh? It looks like one of the contestants has appeared.”

Kilto’s comment prompted Ronove to look towards the contestant entrances. Roman, senior instructor of Wild Beast Style, had stepped out from the western side.

“Well, will ya look at that. That’s one blinding sun today,” he murmured, making his way onto the stage, the katana propped on his shoulder.

“Looks like the first contestant to make it on stage is Roman-sama! The weapon in his hand is, of course, the katana! Will he be showing us the overwhelming speed that helped him breeze through the preliminaries once again?!”

As the atmosphere started to liven up, Kelvin also appeared, this time from the eastern entrance. Just like Roman, he was wearing a light outfit. It was black like his usual robe, but the different design made for a nice change. What drew the eye most, however, was not his armor, but the weapon in his hands.

“Th-That’s...”

“It’s a sword! Kelvin-sama intends on facing the senior instructor of Wild Beast Style with a sword! Wasn’t he supposed to be a Summoner?!”

In response to the jab blaring over the speakers, Kelvin muttered to himself,

“Summoners can use swords too!”

What he had selected was a normal longsword. The public’s impression of him had always been that of a Green Mage, and it was only recently that this had been replaced with the image of a Summoner. Not once had there been any mention of him using a sword, and the unexpected development sent the fever pitch in the arena up another degree.

The circular coliseum had a stage in the middle surrounded by concentric rings of ever-higher seats. There was a ring of lawn between the stage and the first row that was accessible only to the contestants and tournament personnel.

“Kelvin! One hit! Finish him in one hit!”

“Good luck, Kel-nii!”

This area also served as exclusive seating where contestants could watch each other’s fights from up close. Sera and Rion were currently taking advantage of this opportunity and cheering Kelvin on from behind his corner. However, each round of their cheers was upping the intensity of the jealous glares on Kelvin. He couldn’t very well tell them to stop, so he merely suffered the uncomfortable attention in silence, smiling wryly.

“Those two are Empress and Black Meteor! Despite also being contestants themselves, it looks like they are serving as Kelvin’s seconds. Look at him being flanked by beauties! Even I’m jealous, and I’m a woman! Kelvin-sama is currently being bathed in the furious stares of all the men in the stands!”

“I do concede that Rion-chan is cute. She’s not quite on Goma’s level, but I think she makes a great little sister.”

“Uh, I didn’t ask, Kilto-sama.”

As Ronove attempted to stop Kilto from derailing the conversation to the topic of little sisters, Roman and Kelvin approached each other on stage.

“Pretty ardent support you got. It’s like night and day compared to the sausage fest in my corner,” Roman commented, jerking a thumb at the dimly lit entrance he had emerged from, where five beastkin men were looking on with fierce glints in their eyes. Companions of a contestant were allowed to accompany him or her on the way to the stage but not allowed onto the lawn

itself. Consequently, his disciples had decided to watch from the back as a compromise.

“You have some pretty good companions of your own. Those are eyes that fully believe in your victory.”

“Oh? You can tell?”

“Of course. My own companions have the same eyes, after all.”

“Touché.”

During the somewhat cliché exchange, a small part of Kelvin was checking out Roman’s head. *Ah, he’s wearing a topknot.*

“So, young man, do you actually know how to use a sword?”

“Wha—? Oh, well, you can say that. I might not look like it, but yep, I’m pretty confident in my sword hand.” Kelvin gave the blade he was gripping a few practice swings.

“Hmph, looks like today’s my lucky day. I actually feel somewhat sorry for you, having to serve as a foil for my school’s sword style.”

“Hey, I like that confidence. Well, let’s have a good match.”

Roman’s self-assured grin cut a sharp contrast to Kelvin’s calm smile. The two turned and assumed their respective starting positions.

“Both contestants are in place, so let’s get this show on the road! Are you both ready?!”

The two men nodded in response.

“In that case, here goes. Ready... Fight!”

Boom!

The instant the match began, Roman shot towards Kelvin. His sword was still in its scabbard, but that was intentional. This was the stance where he was strongest, as his was a quick-draw style. When he saw how Kelvin still had his sword in the middle guard and wasn’t moving, Roman became sure of his victory.

Take this, Rank S adventurer! Taste the true strength of Wild Beast Style!

In the same motion, Roman drew his sword and slashed at Kelvin's flank. Only a handful of those present in the coliseum had managed to keep up with what had happened up to that point. The number who could predict what would happen next was even more limited.

"Yahhh!"

After swinging his sword, it was Roman himself who hit the ground. Because he had made the impact with his head, the whites of his eyes were showing and his limp body was twitching. The tumult of noise in the arena died abruptly.

Roman's sword had snapped off right above the guard, the clatter of the blade hitting the ground next to him ringing out loud and clear in the unnatural silence. It appeared to have done no damage whatsoever to Kelvin.

"Hmm, not bad as a start. I'm in pretty good condition," Kelvin noted to himself as he sheathed his sword and walked off the stage.

The referee finally came to his senses and rushed forward. After checking on Roman, he announced, "He's unconscious. Bring the stretcher!"

"Master!" the disciples cried, trying to dash out from the passage but finding their way blocked by Gaunian guards.

Ronove took a deep breath to fill her lungs with air, then shouted, "The fourth match of Block A goes. To. 'GRIM REAPER' KELVINNNNN!"

Applause thundered, but the large majority of the spectators had no idea what had just happened. Even the men who had been glaring at Kelvin with hostility were left speechless. Everyone was waiting for an explanation from Kilito.

Ronove continued, "Everyone, did you catch what just happened? No? Neither did I! However, we can't very well just go, 'That was sick!' and move on, can we? Kilito-sama, please explain it to the rest of us!"

"I...have no idea either. I was able to follow up to where Roman drew his sword, but what Kelvin did next was so fast that my eyes could not pick it up at all. What on earth did he do?"

"In other words... 'That was sick!' is all we have after all?"

“No, no, give me a second! This stage is outfitted with a magic item I developed that takes footage of what happens onstage! If I replay that footage slowly...”

Kilto desperately tried to redeem himself, deathly afraid of what his father would do or say to him otherwise. At the same time, Kelvin was being welcomed back by his companions.

“Congratulations on getting through your first round, Kel-nii!” Rion exclaimed, diving into his arms. He caught her gently and enveloped her in a bear hug.

“Not too shabby,” Sera chimed in. “Though I do kind of feel your opponent wasn’t strong enough to even help you get warmed up.”

“All I did was grab his sword and drop him to the floor. I didn’t even get to use my own. Well, I guess that’s about as much as I can expect from someone with Sword Mastery at Rank B. Setsuna’s quick draw was much faster than his.”

“Oh right, that black-haired girl. Yeah, you’re right.”

“Hm? Who’s Setsuna?”

“Oh, right, you never actually got to meet her. She’s one of the Heroes that Colette summoned...”

The crowd looked on, still thoroughly bewildered, as Kelvin and his companions disappeared into the eastern entrance, chatting nonchalantly.



The first-round matches continued at a brisk pace, and soon it was time for Sera’s match with Guin in Block C. Up on stage, Sera was standing in her characteristic pose with her legs spread and arms crossed, wearing the same black outfit I had chosen. Facing her was Guin, who was wearing light armor and already in a battle-ready stance.

“Ready... Fight!”

As soon as Ronove’s voice rang out, Guin burst into action. He seemed filled with motivation, a somewhat surprising departure from his usual self, as he charged forward with all he had, his right arm outstretched.

“I’M BETTING EVERYTHING O— *Peh!*”

“Hm? Oh well. Yah!”

However, Guin’s hand was deflected and his face slammed into an invisible wall with all the force of his own charge. What he had crashed into was Sera’s blessing. At this point, he had probably already lost consciousness. Luckily for him, Sera did not seem to have realized that her blessing had activated. What she did see, however, was Guin suddenly becoming wide open, so she threw an appropriately powerful attack at him.

“ARG—!”

Sera had held back, but even so, the punch was significantly more explosive than the ones that Goma threw. The vicious slam to his face woke Guin up from unconsciousness before sending him back to the darkness once again, all in a fraction of a second. His limp body bounced a few times on stage, then on the lawn before ultimately crashing into the wall underneath the first row of spectator seats.

I facepalmed. “What was he even doing?” *Sera’s blessing only activates when someone is trying to touch her with inappropriate intentions. What is Guin even thinking in the middle of a fight?*

“Let’s just be glad Sera-nee doesn’t seem to have noticed.”

“I guess you can say he was saved by how fast he lost that one. If Sera had caught on, being wrung half to death would probably have been the bare minimum of what she’d have done to him.”

Rion and I had been able to recognize what had happened because we were watching from the outside. Sera, however, had probably only seen Guin stop for a split second before leaving himself wide open. According to her, the blessing did not notify her when it activated. Staring at the hole in the wall where he was buried, both Rion and I couldn’t help but think how lucky he had gotten.

“First match of Block C! Winner: ‘Empress’ Sera!” Ronove announced.

“Piece of cake!” Sera replied with a smug smile, none the wiser.



“Welcome back, Master. Are you tired?”

“Not in the slightest.”

I accepted the towel that Efil was holding out and wiped off what little sweat was on me. After finishing our respective matches, Rion, Sera, Dahak, and I had headed upstairs to hang out in the VIP viewing box. It was the better choice when compared with the contestant waiting room. It commanded a good view of the stage and gave us a change of pace by allowing us to hang out with the rest of the group. Watching from the lawn next to the stage was good and all, but the very pointed stares the men in the stands were shooting my way were making it hard for me to focus on the matches I was watching.



Oh yes, nothing beats a properly cooled room on a hot day.

“I’d expected it to some degree, but I’m still kind of in shock after seeing all four of you knock your opponents out in the blink of an eye right off the bat. I couldn’t be prouder as a friend, but as a guild staff member, I’m just feeling chills.”

True to Ange’s observation, Rion and Dahak had also KO’d their opponents in no time. And because we were all wearing matching black outfits, Ronove had had a field day making jokes about us. As for our weapons, Rion had selected dual swords, Sera had gone with knuckle-dusters, and Dahak a giant hammer. The first two made sense to me, but I was quite surprised by the last one. According to Dahak, he had gotten used to wielding it after doing construction. I wasn’t sure how to feel about a dragon using a giant hammer as a weapon, but he managed to use it just fine even without possessing the skill for it, so there wasn’t really anything for me to say. Then again, all of my companions’ round one opponents were, at best, as strong as the Wild Beast Style guy, so it was only a matter of course that their matches were over in a split second.

“Well, none of our opponents were anyone major.” I shrugged. “Better luck for round two, right?”

Ange smiled wryly. “Wild Beast Style is actually a pretty prominent sword school in Gaun, if you didn’t know.”

“Forget those people, dear brother,” Shutola cut in. “Grandpa and I finished that list of contestants to watch out for. Do you want it now?”

“Oh? You’re already done?”

“There is no one we cannot see through with Shutola’s wealth of knowledge and my discerning eye, my king. We have indeed confirmed the most powerful participants of each block.”

Before those of us who would be participating went off to the waiting rooms, I had asked Shutola and Gerard to observe the other contestants. I had put thought into it before choosing them, and as it turned out, they were indeed the right people for the job. Rosalia and Huba were here as Shutola’s guards, so they had to keep their attention on her surroundings at all times. I knew better

than to expect Melfina to stay focused on one thing, especially when there was food being served. Efil was indeed well-suited to the task, but Gerard was much more familiar with close-quarters physical combat than she was. The clincher was that Gerard would always put forward more than a hundred percent whenever he got involved with any of his “step-grandchildren.” And just as expected, he was extremely fired up at the moment.

Shutola pushed up imaginary glasses. “First is Block A. Besides you, there were only two other people who finished their matches instantaneously.”

“The first was Jereol Gaun,” Gerard added. “The guy who served as referee for Ruka’s match with the Gaunian soldiers. His skill with the fist was quite impressive. As for the second person...”

For some reason, Gerard’s words faltered. I lifted an eyebrow questioningly.

“If grandpa won’t say it, then I will. The second person was Grostina Brujowana. He is a noble from the Western Continent and a fellow disciple of the same school that ‘Peach Ogre’ Goldiana Prettiana belongs to.”

“It was, um, the man we saw before the start of the tournament, my king.”

“Ahhh, that gentleman-like person.”

I look forward to meeting him on stage...although as a man, there is a part of me that’s feeling somewhat apprehensive.

“Argh, so he’s not in my block! Brother, please pound him to mincemeat for me!”

“Sorry it didn’t work out, Dahak. I’ll do my best, if I do end up meeting him in a later round.”

“And that’s it for the people who passed the standard you set, dear brother. Right, Ruka-chan?”

“Yep! Both of those people were stronger than me!”

In case it isn’t clear, the standard I had given Shutola and Gerard was: people stronger than Ruka.

“Next is Block B, Rion-chan’s block!” Shutola continued. “The strongest person was the Beast King, King Leonhart Gaun. Not surprising, right?”

“It did surprise me when he showed up and fought with the appearance of a woman,” Gerard added.

I smiled wryly. “So he really did keep the look.”

The person who had given the opening speech of the Beast King Festival was a woman I did not recognize. Judging from the awkward look on Jereol’s face (he had been standing right next to her), I could largely deduce what was going on there.

Gerard nodded. “And the only other noteworthy contestants were Prince Yujil and Sabato.”

“There were a few people about as strong as Ruka-chan, but almost all of them were nameless swordsmen,” Shutola concluded. “The only one really worth mentioning is Sabato, whom Rion-chan will be facing in round two.”

“Oh, it’s Sabato next? Rion, he’s really tough, so feel free to hit him harder than you did Gonzales-san.”

I mean, Gonzales went flying from the air pressure of Rion’s sword swing alone. I’m sure Sabato can take more than that.

“Okay!” Rion replied brightly.

After a brief pause, Gerard cleared his throat. “Now, Block C. My king, a dark horse has appeared.”

“What do you mean?”

“To be more exact, she’s the only one worth watching out for in Block C. Sera, lass, make sure you don’t let your guard down against this opponent.”

“She’s *that* strong?”

“She’s a cute, young girl with red hair who is about as tall as Rion. Just as you did, my king, she finished her match in a split second. She might even be as powerful as the Beast King and Goldiana-dono.”

“Even I have never heard of her before,” Shutola added. “It’s almost strange how obscure she is despite being so strong.”

A girl Shutola doesn’t know of who makes even Gerard wary? Who on earth

can she be?

Rion raised her hand. "Um, I think I might have met someone who fits that description."

I looked at her curiously. "Where?"

"It was our first night in Gaun, if I remember right. Hak-chan, do you remember the girl you bumped into in front of our inn?"

"Huh? Me? Uh..." Dahak looked surprised at suddenly becoming the topic of the conversation, then started. "Oh, right! That impertinent little brat!"

Rion proceeded to explain how, while I was in the middle of disentangling myself from a drunken Sera, Dahak had gotten into a spat with the red-haired girl in question and that the entire incident had been his fault.

I shot him a look. "Dude..."

"I'm so sorry, brother! I apologize for throwing dirt on our family's name!"

"Our family's name...as in the yakuza sense? Seriously, where do you learn all these weird mannerisms? Okay, okay, stop prostrating. Getting back to the topic... If even Rion thinks she's strong, it must mean she's the real deal."

"It was, like, she was really on edge. If I hadn't stepped in, Hak-chan might have seriously gotten hurt."

"What?!" Dahak's startled brow shot up.

The situation last time was resolved peacefully thanks to Rion being there to defuse it, but Dahak's readiness to get into fights is a problem. I wonder whom he takes after.

Having listened to the whole discussion, Sera said, "Well, now I have something to look forward to. So, what's that girl's name?"

"The announcer lady called her Bahl," Shutola replied before turning to Ruka and asking with a cute head tilt, "Pretty uncommon name for a girl, right?"

Ruka also tilted her head cutely and replied, "I know, right?"

The sight of the two of them backchanneling each other caused Gerard to melt into a puddle of goo.

Well, sounds like we have someone new to keep an eye out for. According to the brackets, that girl and Sera will be fighting each other in the finals. Looks like things are gonna get thrilling!

Chapter 4: Wall

The Beast King Festival was a tournament for those who possessed true strength—the ultimate celebration of and for warriors from all over the world. The sixty-four participants who filled the participation slots were all masters and experts in their own fields, with every last one being among those the general public would call “monsters” with both reverence and fearful awe. Anyone who managed to make it through the first round alone would be welcomed by any country with open arms.

However, those “monsters” who survived the first halving of their numbers and reached the second round would find themselves hitting a wall. As such, round two of the Beast King Festival had a colloquial nickname: the Wall. It was said that all members of the Gaunian family who could not surpass this hurdle could never make it to Beast King. Ultimately, this was a distinction that only sixteen people could claim each year—that was how difficult it was to surpass the Wall. However, as with all things, exceptions sometimes occurred.

Kelvin’s opponent for round two was Dishu, an elf famous as a wandering master of the bow. During his first round, he had managed to use his mobility and proficiency with his weapon to lead his opponent by the nose. He had more than proved he was a true veteran fully qualified to stand on the stage of this tournament.

“Hup.”

“OOF...”

However, there was no point to his mobility if his opponent was faster than him. Similarly, there was no way for him to attack if he didn’t have time to nock his bow. To put it simply, he had just gotten unlucky with the matching process this time.

“Round two of Block A ends with another instant KO! ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin clinches his second win!”

The venue erupted into cheers in response to Ronove's declaration of victory. There was now a magic item designed by Kilto floating in the air above the stage, currently displaying slowed-down footage of what had just happened in the match between Kelvin and Dishu. If Kilto did not think he would be able to properly explain the coming match, he would set the item up so that it could replay footage of what had happened after it was over. This was a measure he had come up with out of fear of his father, but since seeing what happened was much easier to understand than listening to a verbal description anyway, the audience had taken quite a liking to it.

"It looks like Dishu-sama backstepped as fast as he could in an attempt to distance himself from Kelvin-sama when the match began."

"His sense of balance must be incredible in order to actually bring his bow to bear in such an unstable pose. However, Kelvin-sama closed the distance before Dishu's feet even touched the ground and drove his sword pommel into his abdomen. At this point in time, who can even believe that he's a Summoner?"

"I guess Rank S adventurers just have monstrous baseline stats. Kelvin-sama still hasn't used his weapon like a proper sword to date! Let's keep our fingers crossed for his next fight! Well then, next is round two, match three of Block A —"



The next match relevant to Kelvin and his party was Rion and Sabato's in Block B. After being called by Ronove, these two came up to the stage and stood around as they waited for the starting signal. Regardless of the fact that they were indeed acquainted, Sabato found himself truly facing what could only be called a wall.

"Hm?"

"Why're you looking up at the sky, Rion?"

"I kinda feel like someone just said something really rude about me."

"What's *that* all about?"

"Even I have no idea..."

“I-I see...”

The two lapsed into an awkward silence that lasted until Sabato said, “So, um, it’s true that there’s all that stuff about my Naming Ceremony after the tournament, but I hope you don’t let it bother you. Please fight me with all you have regardless. That’s what I’m here for, after all!”

“All I have? Are you sure?”

“As sure as I’ll ever be! I’ll take everything you dish out!”

“Ha ha ha, you’re quite similar to Kel-nii, Sabato-san.”

“Huh? How so? Kelvin’s body is so skinny, and he doesn’t have luscious fur like me.”

“Nah, I didn’t mean appearance-wise. But okay, I’ll take you up on your offer and fight with my full strength!”

Rion and Sabato moved to their starting positions and drew their swords. Both Kilto, who was still busy preparing his playback magic item, and Ronove noticed what was going on onstage.

“No, hold on, please give me a moment! I’m still recharging the playback machine with MP—”

“What do we have here?! Both sides are all fired up and ready to rumble! This is surely the best moment to kick this match off! And so, without further ado! Both contestants, ready... FIGHT!”

Seeing that it was the perfect time to do so, Ronove rang the gong that started the match, throwing all of Kilto’s protests to the wind. And so began this fight between friends.

She’s coming from my left!

Right off the bat, Rion disappeared in a thunderous boom and a flash of lightning. However, Sabato had managed, by tapping into all his detection skills and bestial instincts, to successfully catch a fragment of the afterimage she left behind. The Lesser Bracelet—which could only be used by beastkin—that he was wearing served to make his senses even sharper and more perceptive.

“You’re right there!”

The piercing screech of metal clashing with metal rang out. Sabato's sword had indeed hit something, but Rion's figure was nowhere in sight.

She's gone again! Where'd she go?!

Despite the cute black-clad girl not being in sight, Sabato still found his sword blocked by something in midair. However, although he could not see it, his heightened senses told him that whatever it was, it was very dangerous. In fact, he could tell that the entire area of the stage around him was filled with *something* that was causing every fiber of his body to scream, "You're in danger! RUN!"

"Prison of Slashes."

When Rion reappeared, she was high up in the sky, barely within the boundary set by the barrier surrounding the stage. However, what Sabato really had to worry about was the countless number of blades hanging all around him, frozen in place. He could not visually confirm it, but he was indeed locked inside a prison, with the bars being casts of Residual Slice.

"Close."

With that single word, all the frozen slices began moving. What's worse, these were not normal slices, but ones imbued with Agito, which Rion had learned from Gerard. In other words, almost every inch of air surrounding Sabato had suddenly bared fangs at him.

"Ha ha ha...HA HA HA! FINE, I'LL TAKE IT ALL ON! The path to being Beast King sure isn't easy!"

Sabato grinned from ear to ear as he charged straight into the typhoon of attacks.



"As expected, Rion won that one handily," I commented, looking down at the stage from my viewing box while listening to Ronove's declaration. Rion was energetically waving our way, her face beaming, as Sabato lay in a puddle of his own blood next to her. "Rion is really just too kind."

"She is. The Agitos she set up were very shallow," Mel agreed before taking

another bite of yet another snack.

“Admittedly, her kindness is one of her strengths. Oh, hey, can I try some of what you’re eating?”

“Of course. Here you go.” Mel speared a piece with a fork and offered it to me. “It’s really good.”

I ate the whole morsel in one bite. “Wow, this *is* good!”

Still, I think Sabato deserves some commendation for evading two whole rounds of Prison of Slashes, even if it was a more forgiving version. That attack’s actually pretty troublesome to deal with, as you can’t see the slices and they remain imbued with the characteristics of the sword they were made with.

“Kilto-sama, blood suddenly spurted out from all over Sabato-sama’s body. What just happened?”

“I have no idea. Rion-sama was moving way too fast for me to see. Why was she so high up anyway?”

“So, it’s the usual. In that case, Kilto-sama, please show the footage using your magic item—”

“I TOLD you that it was charging! I couldn’t use it during the match just now, so there is no footage to show!”

“Whaaat?!”

The spectators in the stands booed loudly.

Well then, next are the round two matches in Block C. Let’s see what this red-haired girl can do.



The other matches of Block B went by in a blur, and it was now Block C’s turn. There were two matches that I was looking out for: Sera’s and that of the red-haired girl that Shutola and Gerard had pointed out. Both of them had knocked out their respective opponents in round one in the blink of an eye, clearly proving they were a cut above the other contestants. When Sera’s match came—hers was first because her number was lower—she demonstrated that round two, so dreaded as “the wall,” was no obstacle to her performing as usual.

“The match is over! It was a shutout victory for Empress!”

Her opponent was a Gaunian soldier who had exuded the fierce aura of a true veteran. However, a single punch later, he was buried in the far wall as deeply as Guin had been, giving me a strong sense of déjà vu.

“Totally easy!” Sera sharply pointed at me in my watching box, a “How was *that*?!” look on her face. That was the expression she made when she wanted to be praised.

Ah, did she get a little jealous seeing how much I doted on Rion for winning?

“What are we seeing?! Is this a declaration of war from Sera-sama?! She’s pointing directly at Kelvin-sama! Everyone in his party has won every single one of their fights so far! Is Sera-sama declaring that the only opponents worth facing are her own companions?! This is an expression of absolute confidence!”

“Huh?! Uh, no, that’s not, wait—”

Sera flew into a fluster at Ronove’s mistaken interpretation. *I can see how someone who isn’t familiar with her might get that impression, though.*

“My king, did we just gain a whole lot of enemies from that remark?”

“Leave it. No one who would turn hostile towards us from something like that is worth bothering with. I can’t speak for Leonhart or Red Hair, but Prettia definitely understood Sera correctly. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. What does is Red Hair’s match, which should be coming up soon. Her number—”

“Third match in round two of Block C,” Ange offered, reading aloud from a pamphlet of the tournament. “It’s the match after the next one.”

“Ah, midway through Block C, then. Looks like there’s still some time. In that case, I’ll go pick Sera up now.”



“I sure hope Kelvin’s not angry at me...”

Sera plodded along, her shoulders drooping dejectedly from her failure to clear up the huge misunderstanding that had come from her tiny gesture. Her current figure cut a stark contrast to how proud and victorious she had looked right after the match. Afterwards, she had tried to let Ronove know that she

had misinterpreted things, but the next match had started and the matter simply got swept aside.

“Who’d you say is angry?”

“WHOA?!”

“Uh, you don’t have to be *that* surprised...” Kelvin smiled wryly as he appeared from around the corner. “Congratulations on getting through round two. I mean, it’s not like you would have lost against someone like that, but still.”

“Th-Thank you...”

“Oh, and...”

Sera reflexively pinched her eyes shut as she saw Kelvin reaching out with his hand. She thought she would be getting reprimanded for what had just happened, but the sensation that she felt was that of her head being patted gently.

“Huh?”

“The way we’re shooting through the rounds is drawing quite a lot of attention, just as we wanted. At this rate, all the super rare and challenging quests will soon be ours! Hm? What? Why do you look so shocked?”

“I mean, huh? But I... Huh?!”

Sera’s confusion showed no sign of abating. She had expected thunder to fall on her head but was met instead with the reward she had wanted so much.

“Ha ha, did you seriously think I’d be mad at you?”

Sera nearly blurted out, “How did you know that?!” but barely managed to bite the words back. She quickly corrected her posture and adopted her characteristic pose.

“I-I have no idea what you’re talking about! Me winning is a given! Forget *that*—all you should be doing right now is focusing on patting my head! Put more emotion into it!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

In a complete one-eighty, Sera was now proudly demanding what she felt she deserved. Kelvin decided to read the atmosphere—and honestly, it wasn't as if he didn't already want to do it—and tenderly ran his fingers through her luscious and slightly sweaty hair. The soothing moment provided both of them with respite and breathing space. However, it also invited inattentiveness.

“Can you not flirt with each other in the middle of the road? Get out of my way.”

Both Kelvin and Sera flew into battle readiness, backing off a few steps to take some distance. Their heartbeats had shot up all of a sudden and cold sweat soaked their backs. They were not flustered from having been caught flirting. No, this reaction was because the flash of killing intent emitted by the red-haired girl before their eyes had set off every warning bell inside their heads.

Sera, is this the girl everyone was talking about?

::Yep, she's Red Hair. Or, I guess, Bahl.::

Kelvin and Sera took a better look at Bahl. As described, she was quite similar in both height and age to Rion. Her fiery-red hair was tied up in a side ponytail, and she was wearing tournament-issued short pants—probably for ease of movement—and greaves designed for use in attack. They were weapons specialized for close-quarters combat focusing on leg techniques.

“What, is it custom among adventurers to stare at people's faces?” the girl asked, her almond eyes narrowing. “That's a pretty rude custom, if you ask me.”

“Ah, sorry. We're just surprised about being talked to all of a sudden.”

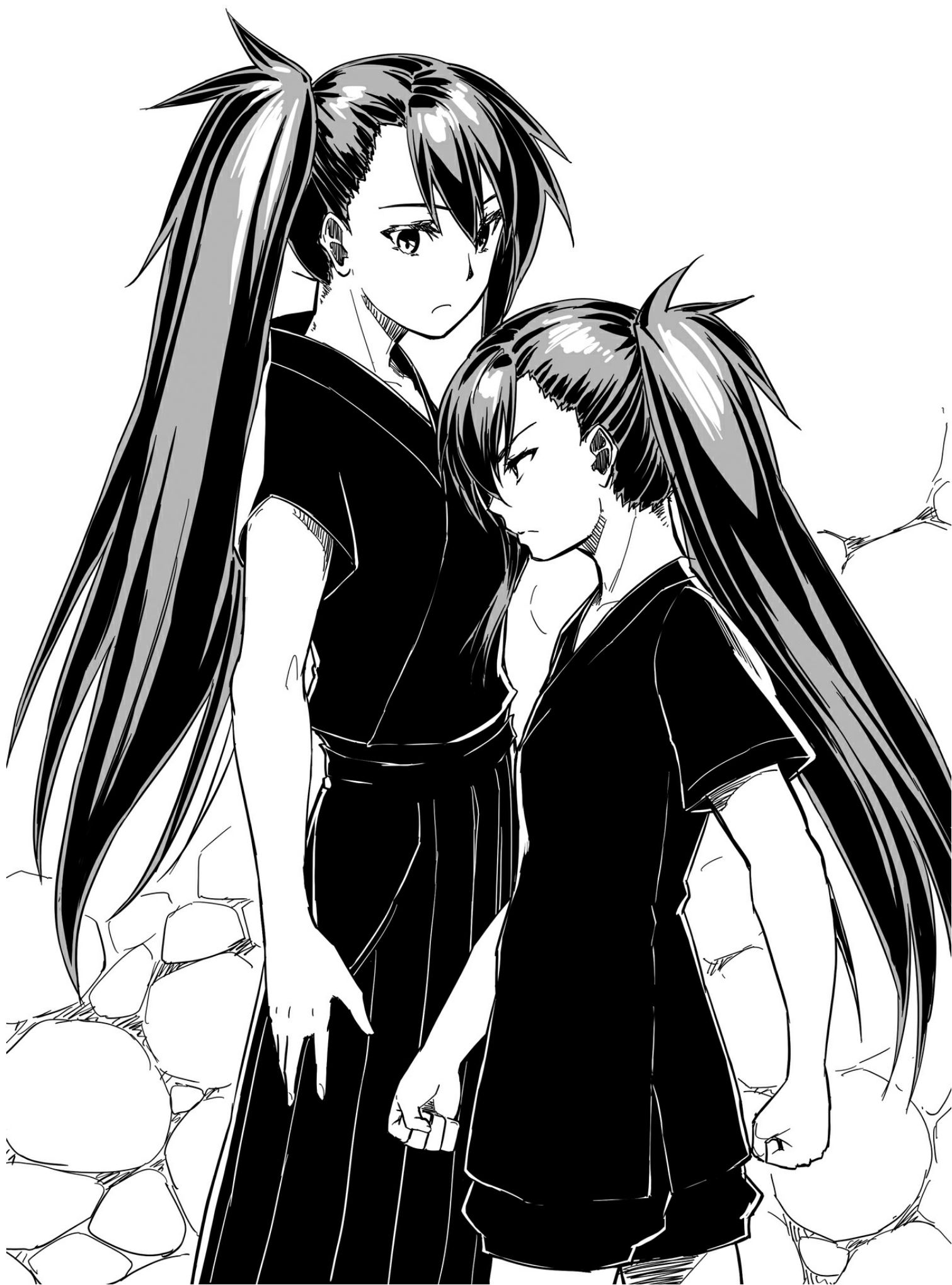
“Hmph, what an exaggerated reaction. Well, are you gonna get outta the way?”

“Of course. Sera.”

“Mh-hm.”

The young girl passed them with a sour face. She seemed entirely uninterested in addressing them, indicating that her business there was done. Only after she turned the corner and disappeared from sight did Kelvin and Sera

finally relax.



“She’s...much more of a force to be reckoned with than I thought,” Kelvin murmured. “Sera, that girl is definitely going to climb up through the tournament.”

“I imagine so. Rion was right—Dahak is no match for her. So, what was her Status like? You used Analyze Eye on her, right?”

Kelvin quietly shook his head. “It didn’t work.”

“Are you serious?!”

“Completely. Her Status is hidden with Rank S Concealment, and I can’t even tell if it’s her own skill or someone close to her.”

This was the first time Kelvin had met someone whose Status he could not see using Analyze Eye—with the exception of the Beast King, of course, who used an item that could obfuscate his numbers.

“Well, that just makes it even more interesting! I can’t wait to fight her!”

“Yep, it’s a good omen. Hmm...there *is* one other thing that’s bugging me.”

“What is it?”

“Somehow, I feel like she seemed quite similar to you. Not only her hair color and style, but also her eyes, for example.”

Kelvin also thought, *Of course, her chest size is completely different*, but decided to keep it to himself for the sake of the demon’s honor.

“You think so? I don’t really see it myself... WAIT! Kelvin, don’t tell me you plan on laying your hands on her?!” Sera slowly raised a fist.

“That’s not it! I won’t, I swear! Have you noticed how your reactions are being influenced by Goma lately?! I’m nowhere near as tough as Sabato is! A serious punch from you is no joke!” Kelvin was vehement in his denial, as he understood that his life was on the line. “What I wanted to say is...do you have a little sister?”

“No, I don’t. Or if I do, I’ve never met her—I grew up in a big mansion all by myself. And it was centuries ago. I never heard of father having concubines either.”

“Oh wow, I didn’t expect you to be so forthcoming with the details.”

“It’s not like it helps me to hide any of it, right? My father and mother were very close! Hitting Viktor was one thing, but my father would never, ever raise his hand against my mother!”

Gustav was a king who had both heavily doted on his daughter and greatly treasured his wife. And somehow, in the middle of all that, Viktor would get hit as collateral damage. Kelvin found himself feeling somewhat sorry for the late demon general.

“Well, I’m just saying that’s the impression I got.” Kelvin shrugged. “She didn’t have wings or horns that I could see.”

“More importantly, the fact that she passed through here means her match is soon.”

“Ah, you’re right. Let’s return to our viewing box quickly.”

The pair quickly headed for the VIP room where their companions were waiting. To no one’s surprise, Bahl won her match handily. Just as Kelvin and Sera did, she finished her opponent within a split second, completely shutting him out. Due to this, her true strength remained a complete mystery.



The matches in round two had largely finished. With fewer than half of the original sixty-four contestants remaining, the temperature was rising higher still. It was now the second match in Block D, and Goldiana Prettiana and Goma were facing each other on stage.

“YAH!”

“Hmph!”

Goma drove another full-powered punch into Goldiana’s abdomen, but his abs of steel did not budge an inch. Goma’s fist, however, was gradually getting more and more beaten up.

Ugh, he’s taking all of my attacks head-on without even trying to dodge. He looks entirely unhurt while my fist is about to reach its limit. So, this is what a Rank S adventurer is like.

Goma backed off to get her thoughts in order, hiding her blood-soaked hand. She was wearing Ogress's Necklace, an accessory she had purchased with the money earned from quests she had completed as an adventurer. This was an item that could be activated to buff her Strength stat, but its effects had run out long ago. Then again, even when it had been in effect, she had not been able to so much as scratch Goldiana.

"Goma, the eyes! Aim for the eyes!"

"Kilto-sama, as commentators, we're not supposed to show favoritism! And your advice is really underhanded too!"

Indeed, the venue was growing so heated that a fight seemed about to break out even inside the commentator's box.

"Well then...Goma-chan, you already understand the difference in strength between us, don't you? Can I convince you to just give up and throw in the towel? I don't like raising my hand against young maidens."

"Is that why you haven't attacked me even once?"

"That's right. You have a pretty face, Goma-chan, and I don't want to leave a wound on it. That fist of yours is almost done, isn't it?" Goldiana winked at where Goma was hiding her fist.

"You noticed. Well, I might be a woman, but I am a Gaunian too. I'm not going to give up just because I know I can't win! RAAAHHHH!"

Goma sped towards Goldiana in zigzagging movements, going so fast that Kilto could barely keep up with his eyes. She seemed to want to decide the fight with one last attack.

Looks like that really is all the speed she can muster, Goldiana thought. It's a fine line between courage and foolishness, Goma-chan. But I do like people who stubbornly stick to their beliefs!

The moment Goma kicked off, for the first time in the match, Goldiana shifted from standing upright to assuming a fighting stance. He pulled back an arm with his index finger—which was thicker than most women's wrists—extended.

"In that case, have this parting gift from me, Goma-chan. Bee Stylet!"

His huge arm was unleashed so fast that space almost seemed to warp around it. The extended finger was pointed directly at Goma, who was still in the middle of running towards him. However, she was far away and not in range yet, no matter how much reach Goldiana's arm had.

Goldiana-san misjudged the distance? Or was it just a feint? No, this is—

Goma felt *something* rushing at her. The instant she registered it, she was violently blown back. When she landed on the lawn, she was unhurt, but she also was unconscious. The referee made his way over and confirmed that she was out of the fight, then turned to Ronove and shook his head.

“The winner of the second match of round two, Block D, is ‘Peach Ogre’ Goldiana Prettianaaaa! Another Rank S adventurer moving on to the next round!”

“Medics! Get your asses over there right now! If anything’s happened to Goma, your heads are gonna fly!”

“Kilto-sama, you’re on air right now! Oh goddess, whose idea was it to make this person a commentator?!”

The kerfuffle in the commentator’s box was soon brought under control, and Goldiana was again declared the winner. After the huge giant finished waving at the crowd in response to the cheers, he rushed over to Goma’s side. His girly way of running was very much at odds with his appearance. To be blunt, it was just creepy.

“Mm, it looks like her face didn’t get hurt. That’s a relief. Right, honey?”

“Uh, are you talking to me?” The beastkin Goldiana had addressed looked taken aback.

Instead of answering him, Goldiana stuck a hand down his shirt, right between his full and bountiful pecs, and rummaged around a bit before pulling out a bottle filled with what looked like ointment.

“Once Goma-chan fully comes to, can you give this to her?”

“This is a salve for her wounds?”

“Oh no, silly. It’s a moisturizing cream that will do wonders for her skin. She

stays out in the sun a lot, doesn't she? And I'm just beside myself worrying about her skin. This is the best moisturizer I've ever come across. Tell her to contact me when she needs more. All right, I'm off!"

"Uh..." The medic stared speechlessly, holding the bottle that had been forcibly shoved into his hands, as Goldiana skipped away, whistling cheerfully.

"Hold on! He just took out a bottle of who-knows-what from his chest! That's got to be against the rules!"

"You sure are reaching, Kilto-sama. Um, to clarify, the accessory that Goldiana-sama brought on stage was the Bra of Maidenly Secrets. It is a Rank C item with storage capabilities."

"A b-b-bra?!"

"Taking an item out and using it during a match is not permitted, but since the match is already over, there is no problem here. I mean, we can't very well specify what underwear contestants choose. But I'm as surprised as you are that such an item exists. It doesn't contribute anything to his ability to fight, but according to Goldiana-sama, it is his 'lucky underwear,' something that he would wear for special occa—"

"R-Ronove-san, I'm sorry, I feel a little sick right now. Please change the topic..."

After this match, there were quite a few male spectators who also rushed to the toilet with their hands clapped over their mouths.



The last match in Block D's round two was between Dahak and Akgas. They were both quite tall—not a match for Goldiana, of course—and were equipped with the largest weapons issued by the tournament organizers: a hammer and an ax, respectively. Them facing off against each other made for a rather impactful scene.

"I'm so touched. So she really was an angel after all..."

At least, the composition of the scene was impactful. For some reason, though, Dahak was pressing a hand to his eyes. Not his mouth, but his eyes.

“Uh, you okay there? Are you feeling sick?”

Dahak was so obviously out of it that even his opponent was worrying about him.

“I’m fine. I’m totally fine. I’m just so touched right now by the scene of that gentle and beautiful goddess caring for her fallen friend.”

“I...see. Uh, good for you, I guess.”

“I’m sorry I made you worry. I’m totally fine now. Let’s do this, Akgas.”

“Hah, I’ll take your word for it. Now that Sabato-sama, Goma-sama, and Guin have all been defeated, losing is not an option for me. I’ll be collecting on that debt from the Grand Scarlet Canyon, Boga!”

“Boga’s the rock dragon! I’m Dahak! The black dragon!”

Dahak smashed the stage with his large hammer a few times. Of course, Akgas’s mistake had been intentional. It was his strategy to provoke his opponent, and it was working.

“Looks to me like the two contestants are just raring to go! Are we ready to kick things off, Kilto-sama?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure, why not.”

“Kilto-sama, please don’t turn apathetic just because the contestant you were cheering for dropped out! We are on official duty here! Do you want the Beast King to scold you for not doing your job properly?”

“I just... I just can’t. Right now, the pain and sadness I’m feeling surpasses even my fear of my father! Gomaaa!”

Kilto collapsed in the commentator’s box, wailing. It even looked like he was emanating a dark aura of some sort. True to his own words, he was clearly not fit for work anymore.

“Ugh, he’s gone. Screw it! I’m moving things along at my discretion! Contestants: ready, fight!”

“You’re being pretty dismissive about it too!” Dahak growled in response to Ronove’s half-desperate starting signal. However, the match had begun.

FLASH!

“What?!”

A bright light exploded in the middle of the stage like a flash grenade, robbing both the contestants and spectators of their vision. Dahak, who was closest, bore the full brunt of it. Akgas had used a Flash Arrow, an expendable item normally applied to arrows that he had modified into an accessory. It was still a single-use object, but its effect was tremendous.

With my inferior stats, the longer the fight lasts, the more disadvantaged I'll be. So this split second is my only window for victory!

Akgas, being the only person who had properly covered his eyes when the Flash Arrow went off, rushed up to Dahak and brought his great ax to bear. The reason he had chosen a weapon that would leave him wide open when he used it was that it enabled him to start the match with the most powerful attack he was capable of.

Eat this!

The light faded, revealing Dahak's figure. Akgas swung his ax with every drop of strength he could muster...

“Ahpft!”

...and fell flat on his face.

“Damn, that scared me! If I didn't have this ring sister Mel gave me, that just might have landed.”

“Huh?! You...can see?!”

Dahak was lightly rubbing his eyes but clearly hadn't been blinded. The Goddess's Ring made by Melfina dangling from his neck, glittering silver, granted him resistance against all status debuffs. What's more, there were now vines wrapped around Akgas's feet, making it impossible for him to stand back up. He struggled to break free, but the tendrils were too tough to tear apart. Now that he was lying flat on the ground, the tables had been turned.

“Well, you ready for this? Clench your teeth, 'cause you're gonna take a little trip through the sky!”

“Noooooooo, what a blunder!”

With that, the round two matches were over. With only sixteen participants left, the Beast King Festival was slowly and steadily approaching its climax.

However, when Dahak returned to the party’s viewing room, he was given a thorough dressing down by Kelvin for falling for Akgas’s provocation and surprise attack so easily. As it turned out, he was the only person in his party who had been affected by the flash.



With the round two matches over, the tournament entered an intermission. It was nearing lunchtime, so the audience filed outside to fill their stomachs with food from the stalls, trading spirited speculations about who was going to win. The stage was now occupied by beastkin dancers who were passionately showcasing traditional Gaunian dancing, keeping those who remained in their seats entertained. However, even in the midst of this festive air, there was still a group that was down in the dumps.

“We’re so screwed.”

“This is very bad.”

“We’re done for.”

“What a blunder.”

Sabato and his companions—all of whom were now out of the competition as of round two—had gathered in the waiting room that had been assigned to Sabato. Here, the mood was akin to that of a funeral. Their positions were all different—one was sitting with their head hanging and hands covering their face, one was sitting with their back against the wall and staring up at the ceiling, and one was lying facedown on the floor—but they all looked equally lifeless.

“I mean, dropping out in round two is just... Oh goddess...”

“What are you saying, Sabato-sama? I got kicked out in round one! I got all that hype drummed up about me being the top hundred-man commander, and for what?”

“Do you think father would consider the extenuating circumstances?”

“Ga ha ha ha! I wish! But considering His Majesty’s personality, I’m afraid chances are slim, Goma-sama.”

Sabato and Goma had been aiming to earn the Gaun family name in the Naming Ceremony that would be taking place once the tournament was over, but now they had a much more pressing issue on their hands.

“Taking on the Gaun name is the least of our worries. What was the point of our journey?”

“In this case, it’s more that we got unlucky, Sabato-sama. We were against, what, Rank S adventurers, one of whom was the previous champion, and companions of a Rank S adventurer. Beating them is as impossible as beating the Beast King himself.”

“At least Kelvin-san and Mel-san healed all the injuries we suffered.”

“That they did. I don’t have a single scratch on me anymore. But Goma, father isn’t gonna care about that. If only we had made it into the top sixteen...”

“There’s no point thinking about what-ifs now. Our treatment is probably going to be decided once it’s clear how far our brothers and father will make it. Ugh, I feel depressed just thinking about it.”

Being able to participate in round two of the Beast King Festival was, in general, an enormous honor. The way the Beast King saw it, however, this was barely an achievement, and naturally he expected more from his children. Sabato and Goma shivered just imagining what punishments he had in store for them.

Sabato suddenly leaped up and shouted, “SCREW THIS! Guys, our situation isn’t gonna improve by us looking down and feeling sorry for ourselves. It’s for moments like these that alcohol exists! Let’s drink this mood away!”

“Now that’s an idea I can get behind!” Akgas cheered.

“What’s with you two all of a sudden?” Goma directed a somewhat disapproving look at her companions. “You do realize it’s still early in the day, right?”

Guin chuckled morbidly. “So, we’re going to our last supper, huh?”

“Don’t worry about the small stuff, Goma! This is us changing gears! No matter what we do, father’s thunder is going to fall on us. So we might as well restore our spirits before it comes! Hey, Guin, let’s hit up a ‘special place’ afterwards too!”

“Sabato-sama, I have a great recommendation!” Guin cried, suddenly filled with energy again. The promise of immediate eros had instantly overwritten the promise of eventual terror in his mind.

Goma sighed. “At the very least, please don’t go overboard. Remember that we still are members of royalty.”

Cheer returned to the waiting room as the four started discussing what to do next. Unbeknownst to them, a woman with the appearance of Risa, Jereol’s wife, was currently standing with an ear pressed to the wall between the two rooms.

Hmm, I’d expected them to feel down for a while longer. Looks like their mental fortitude has indeed grown a bit. I had ideas in case they continued sulking, but I guess they’re off the hook this time.

A roar of cheering went up, coinciding with the moment Sabato and his party ended up being forgiven by the Beast King without being any the wiser.



Now that the tournament was breaking for lunch, we were having a small celebratory feast in our VIP room.

“Congratulations on making it through round two, everyone!”

“Congratulations, Rion-chan, dear brother, and everyone! You all looked so cool!”

The tiny maid and princess both toasted our victories. All four of our participants had absolutely dominated the opposition so far, and it had apparently gone over well with the kids.

“Rion’s gallant figure shall be forever engraved upon my soul!”

There was also one big kid in scary-looking armor, but I didn’t let it bother me.

“Thank you for the support, Ruka, Shutola,” Sera replied. “However, it’s more that we haven’t really fought anyone significant up until now. It’s been a bit of a letdown, actually.”

“Though Dahak’s opponent did manage to catch him off guard.”

“Please spare me, brother. I’ve already reflected on myself and won’t let it happen again!”

Dahak, who had only just been freed from his punishment of sitting in seiza, was gasping for air. In fact, it looked like the session of sitting in seiza had taken a greater toll on him than the match itself. This punishment, which had originally been Ruka’s idea, was proving effective against even dragons.

“Now that there are only sixteen people left, would it not make sense to expect your next opponents to be quite skilled?”

“Efil-chan’s right. The Beast King is still in the tournament, as are his sons and Goldiana-san and *his* companion. Who else? Oh, right, some of those who joined by seizing a ticket are still in too. I think it’ll probably be difficult to have any more instant KOs going forward.”

“Wait, Ange. What was that about joining by seizing tickets?”

“What? You didn’t know you could do that?”

Ange gave us a full explanation of how to participate in the Beast King Festival, even exposing the unspoken rules.

“Uh, no one ever told me. If I’d known, I’d have gotten enough tickets for everyone who wanted to participate.”

“Uh, Kelvin, that would probably really trouble the organizers. Come to think of it, maybe that’s why the Beast King practically gave you those four tickets.”

Ugh, so there really are strings attached to all free meals! If I’d looked into it properly, I might have been able to allow Efil and Melfina their time on stage too!

“Honey, there’s no point beating yourself up over it. It’s not like Efil and I wanted to participate that badly anyway. In fact, I’m very happy with the current arrangement!”

While on my way up, I did walk past several chefs who had collapsed in the hallway. I cast White Magic on them by way of apology, so they should be waking up soon. There's no doubt that Melfina's the one who's getting the most out of this trip. She's enjoying herself even more than the kids are.

"I wanted to join, though..."

"No, Ruka! It's still too early for you!"

"Don't treat me like a child, Grandpa Gerard!"

Ange cleared her throat. "Ahem. Well, let's leave that aside for now. So, about that red-haired girl, Bahl: she's in the tournament because she managed to seize a ticket from someone. That's why Gaun doesn't know anything about her either."

"How'd the Adventurer's Guild find that out so quickly? Anyway, that unidentified red-haired girl has finished all her matches so far with a single kick—there's no doubt that she's strong. Sera, don't you lose to her."

"As if I would! There isn't even a chance in a million!"

I can't help but hear that declaration as a jinx, Sera.

"You'll be meeting her at the Block C finals, Sera-nee. Good luck!"

"Thanks, Rion. But you'll have your plate full too. The Beast King's in your block."

"Ah, speaking of the Beast King, he will be fighting Prince Yujil in round three," Efil chimed in. "It looks like it will be a father-son fight."

I accepted the tournament table that she was holding out to me and confirmed what she'd said. It made sense to expect Leonhart to win, but I did think it a bit of a waste.

If they're going to crush each other, then I'd rather Rion got to fight them both instead.

"And as for you, Dahak...when you get to the finals of Block D, you'll be meeting Prettia on stage."

"You bet I am! Brother, this is fate. This is destiny! I've got to show Prettia-

chan my manliness!”

And I wish you all the best. Gerard and I are both praying earnestly for things to go well between the two of you.

“And lastly, my opponent. Ah, Jereol Gaun. He’s Sabato’s eldest brother, if I remember correctly?”

“Yes, Master. He is also the one who served as referee during Ruka’s matches with the soldiers. It is said that he is the second strongest person in all of Gaun, right after the Beast King.”

“Brother, it’s finally time for you to get serious!”

“Thanks for the support, Efil, Dahak. That’s right, this is where things really start for me.”

One major reason I was participating in the Beast King Festival was to overcome one of my weaknesses: close-quarters combat. However, none of my encounters so far had made for good practice, let alone helped me to overcome anything. I had even assigned the skill points I’d gained from my Evolution to close-quarters combat, so I was itching for the opportunity to see how far my new build could take me.

“Looks like lunchtime is about over. You guys, our aim is to dominate all the top positions. Let’s meet each other on the stage in the finals!”

A resounding “YEAH!” came from all my companions.

Chapter 5: Deadly Poison

I was in the entrance of the passageway that led to the stage, waiting to be called for the first match of round three. Because having Sera and Rion with me would draw undue attention, I had asked them to stay in the VIP room.

“Have you all finished filling your bellies?! Lunchtime is now over! Ladies and gentlemen, it’s time for round three, where the chosen sixteen will be battling each other for the championship!”

The venue shook with cheers in response to Ronove’s broadcast. *Honestly, how do the Gaunians manage to stay so fired up for so long? The spectators have been screaming at the top of their lungs for a whole half day now.*

“Before we begin, however, I have an announcement. Kilto-sama, who was helping to explain the details of the matches earlier, has become unwell and collapsed, so he is not with us this afternoon. I hear the voices asking, ‘Do we really need him when we have his magic item?’ And honestly...I agree! This is why yours truly will be attempting to commentate on the rest of the tournament all by myself! No, not attempting—I *will* do it! I don’t need no prince with a sister complex helping me anyway!”

“Wow, she’s wound up...”

I couldn’t tell if Kilto was out of commission from the shock of Goma losing or if the Beast King had done something to him. All that was clear was that the prince had left his seat vacant. As a result, he had just gotten outed by Ronove as a siskon. As a kindred spirit, I could not help but empathize with his pain.

“Well then, that’s enough bad-mouthing from me; let’s move right on to the matches! For the first match of round three, Block A, we have the Rank S adventurer ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin facing off against the champion of Gaun and thousand-man commander, Jereol Gaun!”

When Jereol’s name was called, the cheering that filled the venue rose by another notch. This man, who was considered most likely to be the next Beast

King, had a heart overflowing with love for his country and possessed battle prowess that was second only to that of his father. According to Ronove's introduction, he was considered a champion by the citizens of Gaun.

I remembered Goma mentioning that he was the one who had taught her how to fight. There was no doubt that he was far more capable than Sabato was, and in fact, he was much closer to the perfect image of what Sabato was aiming to become. Jereol did not seem like someone who would resort to schemes and plots like Leonhart was wont to.

Oh, wait, this is no time for me to be thinking about that. Jereol's already up on stage. Let's head out.

"I'm glad to see you have been keeping well since our dinner the other day, Kelvin. I knew you'd make it this far—I've been looking forward to this encounter very much. Ah, in terms of adventurer ranking, I suppose I am the challenger."

"Please, Your Highness. I have been looking forward to this just as much. Let's have ourselves a good match, Prince Jereol."

"Indeed! Hold nothing back. However, do stop calling me 'prince.' It makes me feel all stiff and formal when I hear it."

We exchanged a handshake, then assumed our starting positions.

Huh. It's the same impression I got during our brief time talking at the feast, but unlike most members of royalty I've met, Jereol seems like a stand-up guy. He's emanating the aura of a normal person, something that's been distinctly lacking in my surroundings recently. Him being lionized as a champion actually makes sense. I very much hope a certain prince of Trycen and the Oracle of Deramis can take a page or two from him. Look how bright his totally normal aura is! Wait, why is it blinding even me, a fellow totally normal guy?

"Without further ado, here goes the first match! Ready... Fight!"

Although Ronove had already given the starting signal, unlike my other matches so far, I did not immediately charge in. Jereol also stayed where he was, simply studying me with his gauntlet-clad hands lifted in readiness. Unsurprisingly, his stance was exactly the same as Goma's.

“Interesting. I had expected you to come at me right off the bat.”

“That’s fine too, but good fights ought to be enjoyed to the fullest. That said, there’s no point if neither of us moves, so I’ll do the honor.”

I pushed off with my back leg and dashed forward. His eyes widened slightly upon seeing me charge in from the front, but it was clear that he had no trouble following my movements. *I’m going as fast as Sabato did in round two, but I suppose that wouldn’t be enough to faze him. Well, let’s start with a little warm-up.*

“Hah!”

“Ugh?!”

I unleashed a barrage of slashes with my sword, not giving him any room to breathe. However, he managed to receive, parry, and deflect everything with his gauntlets.

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing, ladies and gentlemen?! Was the sizing up at the start of the match only the calm before the storm?! Kelvin-sama’s onslaught is showing no sign of letting up! As a normal person, my eyes can’t follow any of this! But Jereol-sama is parrying everything so far, so I’m sure *he* can. Of course, it is for times like these that we have the inheritance Kilito-sama left behind—let’s check the footage!”

We’re not going to wait for you to watch the footage in slow mode, just so you know. Hmm, judging from the feedback from my sword strikes, and seeing as Jereol is focusing solely on defending, it looks like this is about the limit of what he can handle. In that case...

“Wow, wow, wow! Look at that fierce exchange! The way Kelvin-sama’s attacks all seem to flow into each other is incredible indeed, but the way Jereol-sama is catching and deflecting them is also— Wait, what?”

Ronove’s nonstop commentary faltered when she looked back at the stage.

“What...kind of a joke is this?” Jereol growled, panting as he glared at me. “Why did you put your sword down?!”

“Kelvin-sama just stabbed his sword into the stage and let go?! Wait, he

managed to stab his sword into *this* stage?!”

As she said, I had just let go of my sword. I was now empty-handed.

“‘Why’? I just said it, didn’t I? Good fights ought to be enjoyed for as long as possible. And aside from that, every time I try barehanded sparring with my companions, I get beaten black and blue. I’m curious to see how far I can get against people outside my party.”

“And for that, you throw away your weapon. Here, at the Beast King Festival. Where you can’t use magic. Against me, Jereol Gaun.”

“Pretty much. I picked up the Combat Technique skill recently, so I want to take it out for a spin. If I can’t beat you, I have no hope of beating your father or Prettia, right?”

I did feel a bit bad about comparing him to those two, but it was true that champion or no, he had a ways to go before reaching their level. If I really had to rank him, I’d probably put him around Azgrad’s level. Even though I couldn’t use magic, I didn’t see any chance of me losing to him. However, I did want to warm up a little in preparation for my coming matches, so my aim was to do a little sparring with this champion of Gaun.

“Hmph! I hope you don’t forget that I am a general of Gaun. I’m not going to make this easy for you.”

“It’s an honor.”

Instead of responding to my words as provocation, he touched the bracelet on his upper arm. Analyze Eye told me that it was called Agile Bestial Bracelet and had the same effect as what Sabato had worn while fighting Rion.

Jereol had clearly read between the lines of what I was saying and decided to go all out. He still had his eye on victory. He exhaled to settle himself, then shouted, “Here we go, all out!” and pounced at me with the speed and ferocity of a beast.

Now then, just how well will this Combat Technique skill from Sera—who’s definitely watching with a smug smile—measure up?



“And you went and lost too. Now the only people from our side still in the competition are me and Yujil. After dropping out in round three yourself, I guess you can’t really criticize Sabato and Goma, hm?”

“I’m truly ashamed.”

The champion of Gaun looked deflated, his ears drooping from a thorough upbraiding from his wife. About half an hour after the end of the match with Kelvin, he had been summoned by his father. The bandages wrapped around his body left no doubt as to the outcome.

Kilto was already lying on the ground next to the Beast King, limp and seemingly lifeless. Jereol had instinctively sensed that the topic was a land mine and therefore decided to ignore the sight of his younger brother’s unmoving form.

“On the other hand, all four from Kelvin’s side are still going strong. This does make us, as the host country, look a little bad.”

“Father, I am still in the tournament too!” Yujil cried. Leonhart’s second son was famous for both his skill with the bow and his handsome looks. His popularity with the Gaunian citizens was second only to Jereol’s.

“That’s the spirit, my son. In that case, I suppose I shall go with the appearance of your first love for our match. I have every faith that you’ll be able to overcome even this tribulation!”

“Huh?”

Unfortunately, this prince also had a rather severe case of gynophobia as a result of the various “trials” Leonhart had put him through under the pretext of training. After much consideration, he decided to withdraw from the tournament. Thanks to this, the Beast King managed to proceed straight to the finals of Block B.



“Ha ha, well this is a bad look. Not being able to lift a single finger against a child the age of my own daughter...” chuckled the nameless swordsman who was on his knees after having lost to Rion.

Kelvin and his friends had been wary of this fighter, as he had been one of those who had secured a slot in the tournament by seizing a ticket and there was almost no information about him anywhere. However, when it came time to actually fight, Rion had maintained an overwhelming advantage over him from start to end. The two did exchange a few sword blows, but the match was decided within ten seconds. The man himself had been the one to declare his surrender.

“So, this is all that my years of training by myself in the mountains amounts to.”

He scratched his scraggly hair and sheathed his sword, which had been a katana like that which practitioners of Wild Beast Style used. Rion couldn’t quite tell whether the emotion in his eyes was disappointment in himself or a thirst for greater strength.

“No, you are very strong, mister! It’s my first time meeting someone who could put up such a good fight against me, aside from my family members!”

“Aha ha ha, sounds like you have quite an interesting family.”

“They’re the best! I love them very much!”

The swordsman’s wry chuckle was met by Rion’s innocent beaming face. Despite the significant jump in difficulty with round three, after Kelvin’s victory, Sera, Dahak, and now Rion had managed to pass through without issue. With that, it was confirmed that all four of them were among the top eight in the tournament.

“Oh, and I’m not a child—I’m turning fifteen next year. Don’t forget it!”

“Uh...really?”

“Yep!”

After that, this exchange repeated itself a few more times.



“Aaaand there we have it! Goldiana-sama successfully makes it through round three, once again entirely unscathed!” Ronove declared.

The original arrangement had placed Dahak’s fight as the last in round three,

but for some reason, Goldiana's opponent suddenly came down with severe nausea, causing the match to be pushed back to the end of the round. Now that it was done, the two names from each block of those who would be participating in the finals were confirmed. Not only were the spectators on the edges of their seats, so was Ronove—although in her case, it was for a different reason. The butterflies in her stomach were due to the two figures currently beside her.

“Goldiana-dono's muscles look even firmer than they did last year.”

“Ah, you can tell too, Jereol? From the look of it, even with my perfect aim, I wouldn't be able to penetrate his muscles with my arrows.”

The newcomers to the commentator's box were none other than Jereol and Yujil Gaun, the two who had dropped out in round three.

“Um...Jereol-sama, Yujil-sama, it's an incredible honor being able to work with you, but why are you here?”

“Well, how can I say it? It's...a punishment assigned by our father, to put it succinctly. Or you can think of it as us wiping Kilto's ass, basically.”

“I...see...”

“Ronove-san, can you move farther away please? See, you're a woman, and if you're too close, I'll become too nervous to commentate properly.”

“I...see...” Ronove shuffled away, feeling a sense of foreboding.

Of course, having Jereol and Yujil there to explain things was going to be a huge help. However, in light of what had happened with Kilto, Ronove was understandably apprehensive. She was worried that another one of her country's princes might end up exposing his strange idiosyncrasies on air. Her recent track record of fellow commentators hadn't been the best, what with the events surrounding Kilto and the Oracle of Deramis. If Jereol, Gaun's champion, also ended up exposed as having a skeleton in his closet, it would be a huge blow to the country's reputation. As a beastkin who had been born in this country, Ronove was proud to call it her homeland. As such, she sincerely prayed from the bottom of her heart for this arrangement to work out without any more crises.

“W-Well then! That is it for round three! Coming up next are the finals for each block! The four individuals who remain victorious at the end will have a shot at the championship! With that said, let’s go over the matchups in each block once more!”

The magic item developed by the late Kilto now displayed the tournament table in large form. Ronove was starting to get a knack for how to use the contraption.

“First is Block A! We will be seeing Rank S adventurer, Kelvin! Versus! Martial artist, Grostina Brujowana!”

“I was indeed surprised by how overwhelming Kelvin’s strength was when I fought him. Personally, as he was the one who beat me, I find myself wanting to see him bring his A game.”

“But don’t forget, Jereol, his opponent, Grostina-dono, comes from the same school as Goldiana-dono, who is a Rank S adventurer. He is sure to put up quite a fight.”

“I see... That’s a relief...”

“What was that, Ronove?”

“Oh, nothing, Jereol-sama! I was only talking to myself. Moving on!” Ronove averted her eyes, but the playback machine did glitch a bit under her control.

“Next is Block B! We will be seeing Kelvin-sama’s younger sister, ‘Black Meteor’ Rion! Versus! Rank S adventurer and Beast King, ‘Reflector’ Leonhart Gaun! As the last remaining representative of Gaun, will His Majesty be able to carry the torch of Gaun into the finals?! This is one fight you cannot miss!”

“We ended up placing all the burden on our father’s shoulders because of our lack of ability.”

“Hm? Speaking of which, Yujil-sama, didn’t you forfeit round three? What led you to make that decision?”

“Uh...well, things came up...”

Sweat suddenly burst from every pore on Yujil’s body. There was no way he could answer honestly and admit that he hadn’t wanted the public to see the

face of his first love. To his knowledge, he had never told anyone who it was, merely keeping his emotions to himself and locking them away inside his heart. He couldn't even imagine how his father had found out. The sure knowledge that the Beast King would take advantage of his emotional weakness during the fight and the wretchedness he knew he would feel upon losing to his first love had given him immeasurable anxiety. As someone who had already taken on the Gaun name, he had tried hard to convince himself to appear. However, he just couldn't do it. He knew he would never recover from a blow like that.

“Ronove, the time.”

“Oh, right! Where was I? Ah, yes, Block C! For Block C, we will be seeing ‘Empress’ Sera from Kelvin-sama’s party! Versus! The previously unknown girl who has risen to prominence like a shooting star, Bahl-sama! Not only are they both unbelievably good-looking, they have also made it all this way by burying their opponents with a single attack! Unlike what their elegant features suggest, this is definitely shaping up to be a full-on close-quarters slugfest!”

“Hmm, this is something I can say of all the matches, really, but even I have no idea who might win. Not only is every remaining person stronger than me, they have yet to display their full abilities. This is especially true of that Bahl girl—I cannot help but find it strange how she hasn’t already made a name for herself with such overwhelming fighting prowess.”

“She might be from somewhere remote on the Western Continent, brother. I’ve heard that there are small independent countries located in places that cannot be easily accessed.”

The Western Continent was filled with a large number of nations of varying sizes. New nations were declared every year, and no one knew the exact number on any given day. In light of this, just as Yujil had posited, there was indeed a possibility that Bahl’s lack of a reputation was due to her coming from one of those unknown countries.

“And last is Block D! Here we have Rank S adventurer, ‘Peach Ogre’ Goldiana Prettiana! Versus! Another member of Kelvin-sama’s party, the large hammer-user Dahak! Just like Bahl-sama, Dahak-sama has also burst onto the scene out of the blue from relative obscurity. Could he be the hidden ace of his party?!”

“I-Indeed...”

“That’s...of course. I’m sure he is.”

Ronove’s guess was a pretty fair take for someone not privy to the actual details of what had happened during the Demon Lord incident. Jereol and Yujil, who had learned from Sabato that the black dragon previously under Trycen’s control had joined Kelvin’s party, found themselves struggling for a good reply. Thankfully, Ronove moved on.

“That said, his opponent is the champion of the previous Beast King Festival, Goldiana-sama! What incredible spectacle will we see?! Ladies and gentlemen, keep your eyes wide open!”



Just before the final match of Block A began, Sera, Rion, Dahak, and I were gathered in the passage that led to the contestant entrance.

“I can’t wait any longer to see you give that hateful man a thrashing, brother! Cave his face in!”

“Uh, I’ll fight him, but I’m not gonna kill him, all right?”

Dahak was breathing heavily, so filled with hatred for the man who he determined to be his love rival that the narrow passage was filled with his thick, violent killing intent. The space surrounding Rion was the only area with clean, fresh air, as it was constantly being purified from its proximity to her.

“I think this opponent seems promising, Kelvin! After all, he’s Goldiana’s junior disciple!”

In contrast, Sera was being quite liberal with her praise of the man, her attitude towards him seemingly informed by her trust in Goldiana. Of course, his performance in his previous matches was also a factor in her evaluation. Probably. Maybe.

“I’ve watched a few of his matches,” Rion chimed in. “He uses soft martial arts, which is an interesting contrast to Prettia-chan’s hard techniques.”

I nodded. “I noticed that too. He’s the type who deflects everything and then strikes when he sees an opening. I’ll have to be careful not to charge in

heedlessly. Well, I've already eaten Efil's food and buffed my stats with magic. I've made all the preparations I can, so whatever happens, happens."

"You just want us to think, 'Gosh, you never take anything seriously, Kel-nii,' but you actually do have something up your sleeve, right?"

"Aha ha, of course not. All right, guys, it's about time for me to go." I slid my sword into my belt and turned towards the stage.

"Win this and wait for me, Kelvin! I'll join you right after!"

"Make sure he never gets up again, brother! Never!"

"Hak-chan, it's about time you calmed down. Here, I'll pat your head for you."

I headed for the brightly illuminated stage as Sera shouted her encouragement and Rion used her small hand to purify all of Dahak's resentment and envy behind me. Before me stood Grostina, my opponent, bathed in the rays of the sun. Instead of the knuckle-dusters that he had used for all his fights so far, he was now holding a very poisonous-looking purple whip.

Noticing my gaze, he gave me a wink and sent a flying kiss in my direction. For the first time ever, I felt hesitant about joining a fight.

When I got onto the stage, I studied my opponent. He was standing with his toes turned inward and wearing a white outfit that looked very similar to male ballet tights. The top half of his body was covered in fancy ornaments like something I imagined a noble would wear, but the bottom half of his body was... Let's just say I wasn't sure where to look and didn't even want to look. It blew my mind that the tournament organizers had prepared such an outfit, but I was even more shocked that someone had worn it. The man was even wearing purple lipstick. Somehow I got the feeling that even the spectators were a little bit turned off.

"I've been waiting for you, Kelvin-chan," Grostina crooned, staring down at me like a hunter eyeing his prey while stretching and relaxing his purple whip with snapping motions. I found myself unconsciously backing up half a step.

Th-This can't be! I'm hesitant to fight?!

“Ah, sorry to keep you waiting. We weren’t able to introduce ourselves properly this morning. You’re Goldiana’s junior brother disciple, right?”

“I’m her junior *sister* disciple, Kelvin-chan! Don’t get that wrong, nu-uh! The heart of a maiden is fragile like glass. If you’re a gentleman, you should be careful about that sort of thing! You don’t want to be making girls cry, do you?”

“Uh, o-okay...”

I’m the one who wants to cry right now! Wait, “maiden”?! What part of you looks fragile?!

“I’ve heard oh so much about you from my dear sister. She said you’re very, very strong, right? But this Beast King Festival is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for her. I’m here to help her make her dream come true, so I won’t be losing to you!”

“Now you’re speaking my language! I’ve promised Sera and the rest that I’ll win, so I’m not gonna lose either!”

“In that case, I’ll have to ‘entertain’ eeeevery last inch of you.”

Groestina cracked his whip against the stage once. The sonic boom it generated indicated his proficiency with the weapon. I drew my sword and brought it up as he adopted what looked like a dancing pose. We then waited in silence for Ronove’s signal.

However, even though we were both clearly ready to start, Ronove’s announcement never came. Groestina and I both shot a look at the commentator’s box.

Ronove noticed our glances and gasped. “I’m so sorry! My mind kind of just blanked out for a moment back there.”

Jereol cleared his throat. “A-Ahem. I am now used to Goldiana-dono’s appearance, but I recall being quite speechless when he first appeared as well. I understand how you feel, Ronove, but you will eventually get used to it.”

Whew, so that getup surprises the Gaunians too. In that case, who on earth prepared that outfit?!

“I-I think it’ll be a while yet before I get used to that...*impactful* look. But let’s

move on for now. Are both sides ready? Here we go with the finals of Block A! Ready... Fight!"

Groestina seized the initiative. From his strange dancing pose, he masterfully manipulated his whip to attack my right hand, the one I was holding my sword with. In other words, he was trying to rob me of my weapon. However, the speed of the whip was still within the limits of what my eye could follow. So I calmly used my sword to parry the attack and charged forward. I had to get close, as the difference in reach between our weapons was far too great.

"YAH!"

Suddenly, I felt my sword being pulled by an incredible force. I immediately dug my feet into the floor and resisted the pull. A taut purple line stretched between the two of us. The whip that I thought I'd deflected was wrapped around my blade. It creaked under the strain as Groestina pulled even harder.

"Oh my! You're stronger than you look! I never expected you to match my strength!"

"Gee, thanks!"

"Match," huh? I cast buffs on myself beforehand and possess the Herculean Strength skill and I'm only matching you? You're the monster here, that's for sure. And the fact that the whip isn't snapping in spite of how much we're both pulling must mean he's done something to it.

"I was sure I'd dodged the whip. What'd you do?"

"Oh, just a little technical something. Want me to tell you if you beat me?"

"Well...sure. I'll take that offer."

Of course, I don't expect him to reveal his tricks in the middle of the fight. If I had to venture a guess, he's using Concealment and Covert Action together somehow. Reminds me of a certain newcomer-crusher I met when I first came to this world.

Cracks ran through the floor of the stage. If things continued the way they were going, I was the one who would be at a disadvantage.

In that case...

“Oh?”

“Scuse me.”

I let go of my sword and jacked up the effects of my Sonic Acceleration all the way. With the taut line between us broken so suddenly, Grostina lost his balance for a fraction of a second. I took advantage of that opening to plant a full-powered roundhouse kick straight into his face.

“Oh, now you’ve gone and touched me.”

I could see myself reflected in his eyes as he toppled backwards, sent flying. A chill ran down my back. In that split second, I felt a discomfort in my right foot, the one I had used to attack him.

“Dear oh dear, letting go of your sword. Someone likes living dange— Oof!”

Of course, that was hardly enough to prevent me from delivering a follow-up attack. Even as Grostina was falling, I rushed to stand next to where his abdomen was and raised my foot as high up as my head before using all my strength to bring it smashing down in a devastating ax kick. My opponent was slammed into the ground so hard that the cracked stage actually broke in half.

“WHAAAAT?! The stage that Caesar-shi worked so hard on all for today’s sake has been destroyed!” Ronove wailed in lament. “However, don’t worry, ladies and gentlemen! In case such a thing happened, those organizing the tournament ordered ten more stages from Caesar-shi as spares! With the help of his wonderful disciples, he managed to deliver our order within the deadline!”

“Well, Gaun does host this event every year at the same time. I know he has been working on improving his stage’s durability year after year, but the contestants who manage to make it this far are always those with rather unbelievable stats...”

I’m hardly in the right position to say this since I’m the one who broke it, but...you guys sure you aren’t overworking poor Caesar-shi?

“Heh...heh heh heh...”

“Aaaand of course you’d get back up.”

As I was picking my sword back up, I heard laughter coming from within the cloud of dust that gave me goosebumps. It wasn't as if I had expected to finish the match with that attack, but the way my opponent's silhouette stood told me he still had lots of fight left in him.

"Gosh, I didn't expect you to press me in that state."

"Because of your Poison Reservoir?"

"Dear oh dear. Kelvin-chan, did you peek at my Status? Ah, which means you must have taken countermeasures. That leg of yours looks none the worse for wear after kicking me twice, after all. Gosh, you're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

Even though I can't see a description, a Unique Skill named "Poison Reservoir" is almost certain to be related to poison somehow. I did feel a slight numbness, but thanks to the all-powerful item made by Mel, Goddess's Ring, my foot's far from being out of commission. I guess we can say the countermeasure worked out fine.

"My poison is so powerful that just a drop would paralyze even the largest monster. It's not as if I was underestimating you, but...clearly I'll have to get as serious as when I face my dear sister. I'm swapping out what I have in my Reservoir!"

Groestina fetched a small, pink, cutesy bottle from between his pecs. *These guys sure like taking things out from the front of their clothes. And the shape of that bottle...*

"Is that perfume?"

"Yep. Or at least, it's a perfume bottle. But what's inside is not perfume, no no no."

With a practiced hand, he sprayed the contents all over himself.

Now hold on a damn minute. I didn't notice it earlier because the bottle itself is pink, but the liquid inside is a vicious purple color!

"Since you've already figured it out, I guess I might as well explain it. My Poison Reservoir enables me to take in all poison that I come into contact with

and inflict its effects on any man who comes into contact with me. You can imagine how effective that is. And on top of that...”

An aura similar to what Goldiana could generate sprang up around Grostina, only with this one being purple instead of pink.

“Red is the sign of being inexperienced, of having taken only the first step in staining one’s ki into one’s own color. There is a school of martial arts on the Western Continent that teaches how to manipulate one’s ki, a power completely separate from magic. Dear sister took that school’s techniques as a base and refined them to form Goldia, her own school of martial arts. Thank you for waiting! I am the Fleeting Flower Blooming in Broad Daylight here to snipe your heart: Grostina Brujowana!”

“That’s...fine and all, but, um, I actually only knew the name of your Unique Skill, not what it does.”

“No kidding?!”

Grostina was so surprised, his guttural roar came out in what was likely his real voice. He—no, she—was apparently a bit of an airhead.

Grostina Brujowana (34 y/o, Fe[Male], Titan, Pugilist)

Level: 113

Title: Fleeting Flower Blooming in Broad Daylight

HP: 2,143/2,143

MP: 812/812

Strength: 1,565 (+160)

Endurance: 1,531 (+160)

Agility: 1,188

Magic: 509

Luck: 777

Skills: Poison Reservoir (Unique Skill), Combat Technique (Rank S), Whip Mastery (Rank S), Covert Action (Rank A), Concealment (Rank A), Service (Rank

A), Cooking (Rank S), Sewing (Rank A), Cleaning (Rank A), Dancing (Rank A), Herculean Strength (Rank B), Iron Wall (Rank B)

Passive Effects: Concealment (Rank A)

The aura surrounding Grostina was now a giant whirlpool, presenting a great threat separate from the effects of her Unique Skill. Was this a sign of one who had mastered the usage of ki? I felt my heart beating with anticipation as I stood before this menace.

“Well, no matter. The rules of the match are still in my favor, so I don’t mind a little handicap.”

“That so? Now, if you attack me with everything you have, that would make me even happier.”

“Oh, no worries on that front. As one of the most powerful moves in Goldia, this technique drains my ki very quickly. In other words, I’ll be coming at you fast and hard. And when I’m using this technique...I never intend to hold back in the first place!”

The whip that was the same shade as Grostina’s aura screamed towards me. Its speed had gotten remarkably faster, which meant its destructive power had also likely been proportionately bolstered. I knew better than to attempt to block it with my sword. It looked so poisonous, it made sense to avoid all contact.

“Hmph!”

However, my Agility was still significantly higher than my opponent’s. I dodged the tsunami-like rush of attacks while closing in on Grostina, hearing hissing behind my back whenever the whip made contact with the stage and presumably melted its surface.

Do you plan on finishing Caesar-shi’s stage off? Caesar-shi is going to cry for real this time!

“You’re now in my attack range!”

“Come closer if you want!”

Grostina’s whip just happened to be occupied, between attacks, whereas I

had gotten close enough to reach him with my sword. However, his face was still filled with confidence, almost as if he knew that whatever I planned to do would be ineffective. Even so, I thrust my weapon forward without hesitation.

“OWWW! Huh, but my Violet Fairy—”

My sword had pierced her aura and buried itself within her bulky pecs, causing blood to spurt out. It was true that my weapon was too dull to deal any significant damage in light of how high her Endurance stat was. However, I had cast Ground Cleave, a Rank A Green Magic spell, on it before the start of the match. It was a rather plain spell that did not have any visible effects, but what it did do was bolster a weapon’s sharpness and endurance so much that it could make the dulllest blade the equal of a sword forged by the greatest blacksmith.

“But you’ll now pay for that!”

“Ugh!”

The instant my attack landed, an intense pain—most likely the effect of the new poison from the bottle that Grostina had just applied to herself—assaulted me in turn. The effect of her Unique Skill could even be channeled through my weapon. Considering the amount of pain I was feeling, this poison was nothing tame like a paralyzing agent. I was experiencing its vicious bite even with Mel’s ring on.

“That’s a relief! So you’re not completely impervious to poi— Ah!”

Sorry to interrupt your speech, but your chin was wide open and just waiting for a kick. As Sera often puts it, “my feet moved before I had time to think about it.” If there’s an opening, I’ll take it! GAH! The pain’s even worse now, but it’s fine, I’m used to pain. Mainly thanks to Sera.

“Looks like someone’s got restless legs!” Grostina grinned after spitting out a mouthful of blood.

“It’s your fault for talking too much.” Dammit, his aura is now stuck to the leg I just attacked with. It kinda looks like one of Clotho’s tentacles. And now I’m consistently being debuffed with pain.

“You can’t get it off, right? My ki is very clingy. It won’t let go easily once it catches hold of something. Just think of it as a bit of birdlime that’s a little

poisonous!”

“Just a little?! I’m going to die of shock from your joke! *That’s* what’s gonna get me!”

Even during our verbal tête-à-tête, Grostina and I continued attacking each other. As she brandished her ironlike fists and poisonous whip, I unleashed kicks in between stabbing and gouging with my sword. I had the advantage due to landing far more attacks—being the one with higher Agility—but her aura was sticking to me in more places every time I touched it, sending more and more poison coursing through my body.

Halfway through, I tried severing the aura tentacles using my sword, but learned that it was pointless to do so, as the bits attached to my body would still remain. Despite being equipped with the Goddess’s Ring, the situation was getting increasingly worse for me. The poison was already starting to affect my vision and consciousness.

“An...opening!”

Grostina ducked through my defense and planted a punch squarely in my right flank. My brain registered several of my ribs being broken.

“Gah!”

I felt no pain. I was already beyond feeling pain, thanks to the poison. However, I did get the wind knocked out of me, and my lungs refused to suck in fresh air.

“Ha ha...ha... This is...the end—”

“You’re right about that, at least...”

At the very moment she was convinced of her victory, Grostina let her guard down. I forcibly burned what little air was remaining in my body and channeled all the power I could muster towards thrusting my sword into her chest. In the same motion of pulling my hand back, I unleashed a side kick that caused the very sharp and very durable sword to make a complete mess of the inside of her body.

“Ha...ha ha, how...stimulating...”

The purple aura dissipated and Grostina's giant build fell backwards. I wasn't sure if I had imagined it, but I thought I felt the ground shake from the impact. Just as I had been slowly worn down by the poison, Grostina had also been bleeding profusely and exhausting all her power. At the end, we were both at our limits. All that was left to do was... Well, I couldn't muster the energy to lift my fist high up, so I settled for lifting it shoulder height, uncool though it may have been.

"Th-The winner has been decided! Winner of the final match of Block A goes to 'Grim Reaper' Kelviiiiin!"

I felt a strong urge to throw up, but I pushed it down and went over to give Grostina first aid. I pulled out the sword and closed the wound, all while mentally thanking her for a truly action-packed and memorable fight.

"Ughhhh...I'm this badly off even *with* resistance, huh? I just might have died if it wasn't for Mel's ring."

As soon as I left the stage, I crumpled onto the lawn. I couldn't muster even a drop of strength in my legs anymore. In fact, I could barely feel the grass that I was touching. It was true that I had won the fight, but considering our respective states, it was hard to tell who the real loser was.

A loud voice reverberated inside my head. "Medics! Tend to Kelvin-sama immediately!"

There's no need to make such a big fuss over me. See, I'm using White Magic to heal myself even now. Please don't blow things up out of proportion. If you do

—

"KELVIN!"

"KEL-NII!"

"BROTHER!"

See? You've gone and fanned everyone's worries unnecessarily.

Soon after, I felt a soft and warm sensation behind the back of my head. Apparently, Sera was resting my head on her lap.

"Kel-nii, your recovery's kind of slow. Are you okay?"

Rion's face suddenly popped into my blurry field of vision.

I'm fine. I can even see Sera's bountiful breasts hanging over me clear as— No, that's a lie. To be honest, I'm having a really tough time. I can't even focus enough to chant my spells.

"It...seems like my spells aren't as effective because of the poison. With my body the way it is now, I can't use any high-ranked spells. It'll take some time for me to make a full recovery."

Ah, it'd be fastest to call Melfina ov—

"Nn..."

Before I could finish my thought, I felt a warm, marshmallow-like sensation on my lips. Rion's face was so close that I could make it out clearly even in spite of my fuzzy vision. In short, she had taken me by surprise and we were now kissing, with her pressing her lips so tightly against mine it was as if she intended to suck all the poison out of me.



“Nn...nn...”

As time passed, I gradually regained the senses that I had lost, feeling the grass beneath me and the soft, cool breeze blowing on my body... That, and the sensation of Sera’s knees quivering from the strain of the position.

“Pwah! Whew... How do you feel now, Kel-nii? All better?”

“All the poison is gone. I can manage my own healing now. Thank you, Rion.”

“Ehe he he...”

Rion dove into my arms and I hugged her close, closing my eyes blissfully. There was no way I couldn’t *not* pat her head.

“Wait a moment! Rion, all you needed to do to use Absolute Purification was touch his hand!”

“It’s much more effective through my lips. Oh, I see what you mean. Don’t worry, Sera-nee. I’ve never done this to anyone other than Kel-nii!”

“E-Even so, you can’t do it in the middle of the coliseum with all the spectators watching! And that wasn’t what I was getting at!”

“Sera, don’t worry. This is just one of the ways that brothers and sisters communicate with each other.”

In other words, it’s nothing more than a greeting for siblings like us!

“NO SIBLINGS COMMUNICATE LIKE THAT!” the spectators all roared in unison, breaking the silence in the air.

Rion and I exchanged looks of confusion, figurative question marks appearing above our heads.



The infirmary of the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena was for contestants who had suffered injuries to rest and recuperate in. It was quite deserted at the moment but not entirely unoccupied. There was one person lying in a bed, and beside that bed, a large man—no, woman—was peeling an apple.

“Stimulating!”

“Good morning, sleepyhead. I’m glad to see you’re more energetic than I’d thought, Grostina.”

“D-Dear sister?! Where is...”

Grostina had suddenly returned to her senses in a very peculiar manner, but Goldiana paid it no mind and welcomed her back with an affectionate look.

“Before anything else, here, eat this for some nourishment,” she said, holding out a bunny-shaped apple slice in a truly older-sister-like manner. “The tournament is on pause right now as the organizers replace the broken stage. And this is the arena’s infirmary. Hon, you lost to Kelvin-chan and fell unconscious.”

“Whaaat?! Really?!”

“What would I gain by lying to you? The only time I would lie is in love’s tug-of-war. But enough about me. Make sure you thank Kelvin-chan properly when you have the chance. You were really badly hurt after the fight, but he healed you. There isn’t even a scar on you, is there?”

Grostina opened the front of her outfit and checked herself all over.

“My body that was abused so much now looks brand-new!”

“That’s not a very classy way of putting it, hon.”

“I’m just that happy about it! Oh, but sister...”

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m so sorry for losing my match, even though you went out of your way to invite me. And I ruined your plans for realizing your love...”

Goldiana smiled warmly at Grostina, who was visibly depressed. “There’s nothing to apologize for. I know now that I was in the wrong. Because it’s *my* love, *I’m* the one who has to seize it with my own hands. The path may come with setbacks and challenges, but the more I apply myself, the deeper my love becomes. That’s why I’ll be giving it my all. Starting with taking the championship today.”

“Dear sister, are you...”

“That’s right! When I win the Beast King Festival, I’ll tell Gerard-sama how I feel!”

“Oh my, that’s so dreamy!”

What a cruel, merciless declaration of war this was. Would the prince—no, the old knight’s—heart be moved by these two young, dreaming maidens? Only time would tell.

“Speaking of which, sister, what do you think of Kelvin-chan? Isn’t he pretty attractive too? I was so excited during the match just now when his long and hard thing came inside me and went wild!”

“How wonderful that sounds! But Grostina, that remark will cause unnecessary misunderstandings, so don’t say it in public, okay? Causing trouble for other people is a hard no-no.”

“Dear oh dear, I’m so ashamed of myself.”

“More importantly, Kelvin-chan already belongs to Sera-chan. Laying hands on a friend’s man is absolutely out of the question. I want her to be happy. That said, if I end up meeting him on stage, I’m not going to hold back.”

Thanks to a certain knight’s noble sacrifice, Kelvin was spared from terrible danger.



“Huff...huff... Run faster, Goma!”

“Th-This is the fastest...I can go!”

Sabato and Goma were sprinting. While boisterously drinking their woes away at a tavern, they had suddenly heard about Kelvin being severely injured during the tournament. Sabato had immediately bolted out and rushed towards the coliseum, with Goma close on his heels. Soon, they reached the venue, and the receptionist gave them Kelvin’s location out of deference to their identities as members of the Gaunian royal family. It turned out he was receiving treatment in one of the VIP viewing boxes.

“Uh...wouldn’t he normally be in the infirmary?” Goma asked quizzically.

“Who cares about irrelevant stuff like that?! Let’s go!” Sabato howled.

The two took off once again. The viewing boxes were close by. Living up to their titles as Rank A adventurers, they managed to reach his room in no time at all.

“Kelvin, is it true that you collapsed?!”

Sabato threw the door open, in such a hurry that he even forgot to knock. What he expected to see was Kelvin lying in a bed, wrapped in bandages from head to toe and teetering on the verge of death. The scene that actually greeted him, however...

“Come on, Master. Just one more bite! Say ahhh...”

“A-Ahhh...”

“Huff, huff...sister Efil, I just finished growing another Starry Leaf of the World Tree!”

“Thank you, Hak-chan. If you grow just one more, I’ll have enough to make another bowl of World Tree congee.”

“You got it! HAAAAAH! BURN, MY SOUL! I CAN DO THIIIS!”

“Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, *gulp gulp*, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cure, Benediction Cu—”

“Kelvin, is there anything I can do for you? Don’t be reserved; tell me whatever you want!”

“Please undo Blood Dominion and let me move my arms and legs.”

“You know I can’t do that! You need complete bed rest!”

The scene was much worse than what Sabato had imagined. Kelvin was sitting on a high-quality sofa inside the room, surrounded by all his companions. While Efil was spoon-feeding him congee with vivid green leaves in it, Mel was single-mindedly casting White Magic on him from the side, countless empty MP potion bottles lying at her feet. Rion was glued to his right arm, happily running her own arms up and down it. Sera was standing behind the sofa, seemingly in the middle of discussing something with him while massaging his shoulders.

Lastly, Dahak was sitting on the ground in front of a potted sapling, shouting something as sweat came out of his every pore.

It was absolute pandemonium.

“Oh, it’s Sabato-san and Goma-chan!”

As Sabato stood there, dumbfounded, his brain struggling to process what he was seeing, Rion noticed their entrance.

“Kelvin, you... Weren’t you badly hurt?”

“I *knew* it’d be like this.”

Goma sighed softly and gently closed the door behind her.



“Huh?! You healed yourself right after the match?!”

“With Rion’s help. But the doctor told me to rest up before my next match, just in case. And that’s what led to all this.”

After speaking, Kelvin turned over and accepted the spoonful of congee that Efil was holding out. All throughout, Melfina continued casting Benediction Cure, covering his body with starry sparkles almost too bright to look at directly.

“Huh?! How did ‘rest up’ turn into this?!”

“Heh heh heh,” Sera chuckled, standing up. “This is the treatment plan that we thought up for Kelvin’s sake!”

“A...treatment plan, you say?”

“That’s right! Treatment plan!”

Sera proceeded to elaborate. Dahak had been tasked with quickly cultivating Starry Leaves of the World Tree, the base ingredient for the highest possible tier of recovery medicine. Efil was using those leaves to cook the best congee her abilities would allow, aiming to purify and detoxify Kelvin’s body from within. Then Melfina’s persistent casts of White Magic would rid him of every last hint of the debuffs, and Rion would stick close to him to eliminate even the slightest trace of anxiety in his mind through her Unique Skill. To top it off, Sera was using Blood Dominion to control his arms and legs to forcibly ensure that he

had complete bed rest.

“And there you have it.”

“Kelvin, you...sure are loved, clearly. I almost thought you were just into that kind of fetish.”

“Like hell I am!”

“GA HA HA HA! You sure have it tough, my king!”

Gerard, who was busy playing with his grandchildren at another table, was acting like what was happening to Kelvin was none of his business.

Sera tilted her head. “Gerard, I’m not sure you have time to be laughing. I have a feeling you’re the person in the greatest danger right now.”

“H-Hold on, it’s not a joke when you’re the one saying that, lass. Your intuition’s almost eerily accurate.”

“Well, it’s just my intuition. I wouldn’t worry too much about it if I were you.”

The old knight suddenly fell silent as if something had just come to mind. Suddenly, the commotion in the room was interrupted by Ronove’s voice coming over the loudspeakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have just finished replacing the stage! Without further ado, we are proceeding with the final match of Block B! Rion-sama and Leonhart-sama, please make your way to the stage!”

Side Story: The Other Beast King Festival

The Gaunian Gourmet Guide

As I am sure most of our readers already know, the entire country of Gaun mobilizes each year to host the extravaganza known as the Beast King Festival. Swordsmen representing their dojos, warriors hoping for a ticket to fame, adventurers joining for various reasons, members of royalty seeking to take on their family's name, and powerful figures from all over the world gather and clash with each other on the stage of the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena, putting all their pride and strength on display.

However, in the shadow of this tournament, there is another Beast King Festival. Have you heard of it? To start with, are you wondering why this food gourmet magazine is bringing up the Beast King Festival? That is a valid question. Of course, we have a reason for doing so. This other Beast King Festival is by no means a competition of martial abilities. However, it is in no way any less fierce than the Beast King Festival that everyone knows.

I'm sure the more astute reader has already predicted where we're going with this. That's right. Allow us to introduce you to this astounding spectacle within the gourmet world...

"Th-This is..."

The day after arriving in Gaun, Melfina was up bright and early—a very rare occurrence for her—and staring at an issue of her favorite gourmet guide series in shock.

"The date... It's today?! Th-This has to be fate! Honey, HONEY! This is no time to be sleeping!"

Melfina vigorously shook Kelvin, who was still asleep next to her, while somewhat enjoying being on the other side of this dynamic for once. Kelvin, however, clearly did not share her sentiment, judging from the groans he let

out with every shake.

Last night, Kelvin had found himself faced with the monumental task of bringing a thoroughly sloshed Sera back to the inn. On top of having his arms snapped and healed multiple times in the process, his neck had also been attacked several times, forcing him to fend for his life long enough for his companions to notice and come to his rescue. Naturally, by the time he got back, he was dead tired. Just absolutely spent.

Melfina had then taken advantage of the situation to convince Rion and Efil, whose turn it was to sleep with Kelvin, to give her the night with him in exchange for the following night, which was her originally scheduled turn. Naturally, Efil, who prided herself on being Kelvin's dedicated caretaker, protested fiercely, but Melfina forced her to back down by mentioning her White Magic, with which she was capable of healing injuries of even the greatest severity in a split second.

What an incredible goddess she was. What a cheap goddess she was. In the end, however, Melfina fell asleep being just as active as she always was, meaning Kelvin did not exactly get the rest that he needed that night.

"Nn..."

"Good morning! Honey, it's morning! It's the time of the day when all living beings should wake up!"

"I can hear you, so stop shouting in my ear," Kelvin mumbled as he sat up. He yawned and stretched both arms high, still subject to the goddess's high-speed shaking all the while. "Hm? It's still early. Hold on, I think this is the first time I've ever been woken up by you. I'll really treasure this experience. So can you please stop shaking me? You're going to ruin the moment."

"Oh, sorry."

After finally being released, Kelvin suppressed the wave of nausea that bubbled up from within. Mel's stats were so high that when she shook Kelvin with all she had, even this Grim Reaper, the Rank S adventurer who was now the hottest topic in the world, had to beg for mercy.

"So, what's going on? I'm actually still kind of tired from what happened

yesterday.”

“But I’ve already healed you from head to toe.”

“I meant that I’m mentally tired.”

“Don’t worry. After sleeping next to me for a night, your mental state has also been fully—”

“I’m mentally tired.”

An awkward silence filled the air. Regardless of Melfina’s claim, she had indeed been *very* active in her sleep last night. But that was enough of that conversation. The two shifted to the main topic.

“Honey, look at this article in my favorite gourmet guide.”

“Gourmet guide? Uh, what’s it say? Extravaganza... Another Beast King Festival... Introduce... So, what exactly is this, Mel?”

“It’s talking about the annual eating competition that Gaun is also famous for! And it’s starting at noon today! This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! We can’t let it slip through our fingers, honey!”

“So, this is, like...a part of the festivities leading up to the main event?”

“How can you say that?! For me, this *is* the main event!”

“I...see. Well, I suppose it’s good to be enthusiastic about something...”

Although slightly creeped out by how gung ho Mel was about it, Kelvin was willing to give the article a closer look as he wanted to support the things his companions were interested in. But when his gaze ran down the page, something caught his attention.

“Hold on, Mel. What sort of competition did you say it was again?”

“The epitome of eternal justice, an eating competition.”

“Uh...I’m really sorry to rain on your parade, but can you read what it says here?” Kelvin pointed to the part of the text that detailed the name of the competition.

“Hm? I don’t understand what you’re getting at, but okay. Let me s— Huh?! *Drinking?!’*”

“Looks like it. It’s not an eating competition but a drinking one. Ha ha, looks like you got ahead of yourself.”

Melfina yanked the magazine back and scanned the article again, desperately praying that Kelvin’s merciless pronouncement was a simple mistake. However, there it was in black and white: “Beast King Drinking Festival.” No matter how many times she read and reread the words, they didn’t change. The goddess crumpled to the ground in despair.

“I’m sorry, especially since you got your hopes up. But this trip *has* only just started. Let’s grab breakfast downstairs and change gea—”

“I’ll do it.”

“Sorry, do what?”

“I’m still joining this competition. Now that I’ve gotten so fired up, I can’t be appeased with food that isn’t made by Efil. At this point, I’m fine with it being wine too! It goes into my stomach all the same!”

“Seriously?” Kelvin made a face, feeling like he had just been dragged into something troublesome.



“Oh? You are entering too, Princess? What a coincidence! So am I!”

“Mel-sama’s joining? Me too! I wanna join too!”

“Ruka-chan, we’re not allowed to drink wine yet.”

“Like Ruka-chan and Shutola-chan, I’m underage, so...”

When Kelvin and Melfina headed down to the inn’s dining area, they found Gerard, Ruka, Shutola, and Rion already at a table. They appeared to have finished eating and were enjoying cups of Gaunian tea.

“You’re entering, Gerard? Looks like a worthy rival has shown up!”

“You took the words right out of my mouth, Princess. That said, an eating competition would be one thing, but I’m confident I won’t lose to anyone in a drinking competition.”

Sparks flew between the goddess and knight. Kelvin was astounded to see

Mel being so energetic this early in the morning. For him, this was turning out to be a day of surprises.

“Funny enough, it seems like those not participating in the tournament are more interested in the competition,” he chuckled. “So, where are Sera and Efil?”

“Sera-nee is... Well, you can imagine.”

“Ah, she’s hungover?”

In sharp contrast to her domineering manner from last night, Sera had no choice but to take things easy today. She was most likely thrashing with agony in her bed at this very moment and wouldn’t be able to get up before noon.

“Aha ha, pretty much. And Efil-nee is checking out the morning market. She said she’s looking for ingredients that would go into a dish effective for hangovers. Ellie went with her as a learning experience.”

“Diligent as ever. I should probably pay Sera a visit later on,” Kelvin commented before spotting a waitress. “Hi, excuse me! Can I have the menu, please?”

When he was done ordering, Mel raised a hand. “I’m ordering too. The competition is in the afternoon, so I’ll control myself. Please give me everything from here...to here. Three of each.”

“I’m sorry? You mean *all* of these...and *three* of each?!”

The beastkin waitress was so surprised by the order that she couldn’t help but repeat it out loud. Meals in Gaun were large, and a girl with Mel’s build normally wouldn’t be able to finish even one. However, the goddess nodded and stressed once again that she wanted three portions of each. The waitress looked at Kelvin, who was sitting next to her, for confirmation.

“Come on, don’t do that, Mel.”

Before the waitress could open her mouth to ask, however, Kelvin was already chiding Melfina. The server heaved a small sigh of relief at the confirmation that the order had indeed been mistaken.

“I-I’m sorry, dear customers, I must have misunderstood. Each meal is quite

sizab—”

“You know that you shouldn’t drink on an empty stomach, right? If you don’t eat enough, it’s gonna be tough on you.”

“Huh?!” The waitress froze.

“You know, big sister, if you suddenly change how you do things, you won’t be able to perform the same as usual. Holding back is not good for you.”

“I agree with Shutola-chan! We can’t bear to see you not eating when you’re so hungry, Mel-nee!”

“Heh. Princess, my king and grandchildren have all spoken their piece. Given how kind you are, you now have no choice but to live up to their expectations.”

“Mel, if it’s the money you’re worried about, don’t be. Rion and I have a shot at the reward money that comes with the championship from the Beast King Festival. We’re on a trip, and a trip is where you’re free of everything. Don’t be reserved. Eat as much as you want!”

“Honey! Everyone! Very well. Your words have reached me. I shall indeed eat as much as I always do for breakfast. Waitress! Please show me the menu again!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Melfina’s finger slid from one edge of the menu to the other, leaving the waitress scribbling everything furiously in a desperate effort to keep up. It was a rather unfortunate occurrence for the chefs at this inn, but there was no telling what trouble Melfina would cause if she were to bring the full force of her appetite to the competition at noon. Although it pained him greatly, Kelvin had made the tough decision to sacrifice the inn’s chefs instead.

“Ah, I’ve heard that dairy products are good for offsetting alcohol. I should take that approach as well. Waitress, give me a barrel of milk and several wheels of cheese.”

“The whole barrel?!”

If anyone thought Kelvin was enjoying himself as he looked on, they would be mistaken. There was, in fact, a completely different thought currently going

through his mind.

Why do I feel a sense of déjà vu from this sequence of events?



Just before noon, Kelvin and his companions made their way over to the largest plaza in the city, the venue for the Beast King Drinking Festival. Sadly, Sera had not managed to get up in time, and Efil had stayed behind to nurse her. Dahak had gone off somewhere on his own. Everyone else was present.

The plaza was filled with just as many stalls as the large avenues were, causing the savory aroma of meat on the grill to waft through the air. In the end, even after breakfast, Melfina had ended up buying food from the stalls she passed and eating them on the way. At the moment, she was holding two towering skewers of meat aloft. After a short incomprehensible sentence that sounded like, “I knew it; meat really is absolute justice!” Mel erased the skewers from existence in a split second and directed her passionate gaze to the food on display at a nearby stall.

“Oh, I hear your voices all right. Don’t worry, I’ll eat you next!”

The stall owner’s eyes flew wide open in terror as he broke into a cold sweat. By now, Melfina had already eaten several stalls out of their entire stock.

“H-Hey, dude, isn’t that The Smile over there?”

“Huh? Hot damn, it really is!”

“Did you hear? The Smile is going to join the Beast King Drinking Festival.”

“I see, The Smile is— Wait, you’re not pulling my leg?!”

“No, man, I hear she’s crushed several stalls while making her way here. We hafta brace ourselves. It’s a hurricane this year!”

“Did you make sure to stock up on enough ingredients?! The Smile is coming!”

When Kelvin perked up his ears, a ton of unnecessary information came flooding in. Ever since he had Evolved into a daemon, he had been mentally prostrating himself in apology left and right whenever he overheard similar conversations. Even he had not imagined how far Mel would take things. He

was starting to regret telling her not to hold back and to be free with her eating.

“Mel and Gerard, isn’t it about time you headed to reception? We finished the registration just now, but I imagine contestants will have to enter the venue a bit earlier.”

“Mm? Is it already that time?”

“*Om nom nom...gulp*. Wonderful! I am in perfect shape and feeling just the right degree of peckishness! Let’s go, Gerard!”

“Indeed. My king, I shall be counting on your support. And Rion and Ruka, make sure to take a good look at your grandpa’s gallant figure on stage!”

Mel and Gerard started making their way to the competition area. The old knight’s three grandchildren, however, had clouded expressions on their faces.

“Trying your best is good and all, Gramps, but don’t overdrink, okay? The one thing that scares me most is those around me falling sick.”

“Wine...scares me a little. Getting drunk...sounds scary too...”

“Grandpa Gerard, my mommy said that a little bit of wine is good for you, but if you drink too much, it becomes poisonous!”

“My king, I will swear off alcohol for the rest of my life. Will you participate in the competition in my stead?”

“You were looking forward to this, right? You can joke around when we get back. For now, off you go already. Shoo, shoo.”

Kelvin pushed Gerard’s back and saw him off.

“Kel-nii, who do you think will win?”

“Hm? We don’t know who else will be participating. Isn’t it a bit early to make predictions?”

“Is it? I can’t imagine anyone being able to beat Mel-nee or Gramps, though. Especially when it comes to eating and drinking.”

“You do have a point...”

Kelvin had met a large number of strange and bizarre characters to date, but none had been even close to being able to eat as much as Melfina or drink as

much as Gerard. The only one who gave Mel a run for her money was “Ice Princess” Sylvia, the person who had been promoted to the level of Rank S adventurer just before him.

“Yeah, no, I don’t think even Sylvia can beat her. She doesn’t have a black hole in her stomach, after all.” *But the focus of this competition is wine. In light of that, Gerard just might have a chance at victory.* “Mel enjoys a drink every now and then, but her strength really lies in eating. I guess Gerard would be the favorite?”

“But we did just warn grandpa. Right, Ruka-chan?”

“Sure we did, Shutola-chan!”

“I guess it’s not so clear-cut...”

Shutola and Ruka exchanged a cute high five. It wasn’t clear if their words were out of concern for the old knight’s health, but it had made it much more difficult to predict the winner of the competition. Kelvin purposely did not ask, “So, it’s okay for Mel to drink?” Mel eats and drinks, therefore she is.

“By the way, who do you guys think will win?”

“I’m thinking Mel-nee. Because we know we can count on her to be the Mel-nee we know.”

“I’m thinking Grandpa Gerard! He promised, but I think he’ll still do his best!”

“I’m thinking it won’t be either of them.”

While Rion predicted Melfina and Ruka Gerard, Shutola had other ideas.

“Seriously?” Kelvin asked, surprised. “Who, then?”

“Heh heh, it’s a surprise!”

“Shutola-chan, that’s not fair!”

But Shutola just smiled knowingly and refused to say who she was expecting. As their conversation continued in the stands, the competition began.

“Come one, come all! Ladies and gentlemen, this celebration of those of us who indulge in the ambrosia known as wine is finally upon us! The name of the event is, of course, the Beast King Drinking Festival! If you think this is just

another opening act to the real Beast King Festival, be prepared to get burned, as this is one competition that burns white-hot! Dear me, I forgot to introduce myself. I am Ronove, an announcer from the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena. I'm honored to be commentating for you today!"

"Oh hey, this competition even has a commentator? Nice. Really gives it an official vibe."

"Apparently, this competition is purposely done in a flashy way so that it lives up to its name as the 'Shadow Beast King Festival.' At least, that's what it says here in Mel-nee's gourmet guide," Rion noted while flipping through the book that Mel had entrusted her with. "Oh, look, the contestants are going to be introduced soon."

"I've been thinking it for a while now, but does this actually count as gourmet? The average person would hardly participate."

"Maybe in a more general sense?"

At the very least, *Mel* considered it gourmet.

"Allow me to introduce the heroes who will be participating in this competition! Contestants, please show us how enthusiastic you are with a brief intro after I mention your name! First up, a steadfast shield of his king, the old knight with a history completely shrouded in mystery and member of Rank S adventurer 'Grim Reaper' Kelvin's party, Gerard-samaaaa! His cute, cute grandchildren are watching him today, so he is more than ready to wow them with what he can do! What do you have to say, Gerard-sama?!"

"I am taking this opportunity to announce that I will be setting a teetotal day each week."

"Did you really have to say that now?!"

Ronove's straight man act was sharp and snappy. From her mannerisms and choice of words, Kelvin could tell that she was used to doing this.

In other words, she must have at least one person in her life who is constantly doing and saying things so nonsensical that she just has to point them out. That's the only way she could be so good at it!

And, well, Kelvin was basically enjoying the event too, albeit in his own way.

“Looks like this other Beast King Festival has kicked off with a completely unexpected declaration from a contestant! This is why I can’t stop being an announcer! The next contestant is our very own prince, the one who has just gotten back from a journey of self-improvement! He claims that his ability to drink has improved significantly from trying all the different drinks in the many countries he’s visited! This is the Rank A adventurer who is hoping to receive the Beast King’s family name this year, Sabato-sama! Sabato-sama, is your duo partner Goma-sama not with you today?”

“My du— Are you suggesting we’re a comedy duo?!”

“Oh dear, we’re running short on time. Let’s introduce the next contestant!”

Ronove’s funny man act was completely natural. As it turned out, she was quite multitalented, being masterful at playing both sides of a duo act.

Kelvin found himself sighing in appreciation. *Is Sabato’s generosity in allowing himself to be the butt of a joke part of the national character of Gaun?*

“Our third contestant is Gaun’s foremost hundred-man commander, Guin-sama! Oh, are you here to protect Prince Sabato today?”

“Nope, I came ’cause I heard there’s free wine! I only bumped into Sabato-sama just now!”

“And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen, it looks like Guin-sama is skipping work to be here! Someone send word to Princess Goma that one of her subordinates is abandoning his duties!”

“Wait, what?!”

However, there was a limit to the magnanimous national character of Gaun, and those who needed to be penalized would be properly penalized. Buff soldiers seemed to appear out of nowhere and dragged Guin off to who-knows-where.

“What quick action we are seeing today! Looks like we have our first contestant dropping out! Moving on, our fourth contestant is *that* legendary figure who defeated His Majesty in a brilliant display to take home the trophy at

last year's main Beast King Festival: Rank S adventurer 'Peach Ogre' Goldiana Prettiana, whose, uh, androgynous appearance makes him a hit among the female audience but strangely unpopular with the men! Gosh, I wonder why that is!"

Both Kelvin's and Gerard's minds froze. Then they erased their memories and told themselves they had seen nothing.

"Oh, it's Prettia-chan!"

In contrast, the three girls in Kelvin's group all waved their hands cheerfully in greeting.

"I'll be giving all you cuties a *wonderful* dream tonight!" Goldiana giggled before sending a huge wink that knocked out every last man in the audience. Many collapsed clutching their chests.

"Goldiana-sama's act of fan service appears to have struck many of the male audience members right in the heart! I stand corrected—he clearly commands unparalleled popularity with the guys too!"

She's responding to what Goldiana did by playing the funny man as if she's the straight man?! Boy, she's really good! Kelvin shuddered at Ronove's overwhelming talent as a commentator.

"By the way, Goldiana-sama, may I ask why you decided to participate this year even though you showed no interest last year?"

"Because I heard Gerard-sama is appearing!"

Even though he had yet to drink a single drop, Gerard already felt sick.

"Ohhh! So you two are in a rivalrous relationship! We're definitely curious to see how it plays out! Now, there are two remaining contestants! Let's ride this momentum and introduce them both! The first is another member of Kelvin-sama's party! She is already well-known within the industry as 'The Smile,' the stunning beauty who plunges restaurateurs into both terror and delight, Mel-sama! It remains to be seen if her seemingly bottomless stomach for food can hold just as much wine. Mel-sama, a word please?"

"You'll provide snacks too, right?"

“I’m sorry?”

“This is wine, so there’ll be snacks to go with the wine, right? I can’t draw out my full potential without the snacks. I’m not unreasonable enough to quibble over the quality, but if you can prepare a huge quantity of snacks, I would be very grateful.”

“I mean, we can, but... Ahem. It looks like Mel-sama will be both eating *and* drinking for this competition. Come to think of it, it is said that snacks make wine taste better. In other words, she plans to fully enjoy every last drop as she drinks her way to first place! What a wonderful attitude!”

Uh, no, she’s just trying to make up for this not being an eating competition, Kelvin thought, facepalming. Then he looked around curiously. “I don’t see the last contestant. Is he late?”

All of the contestants who had been introduced so far were sitting in their assigned seats. However, there was one seat next to Melfina that was still empty.

Shutola shook her head. “That’s not it. Everyone, look over there!”

“Huh?”

Kelvin and his companions turned to look in the indicated direction, but all they saw were the same crowds. Just as they were about to turn back and ask Shutola for clarification, Ronove’s voice rang out.

“It is finally time to introduce—no, *welcome* our final contestant!”

In response to Ronove’s declaration, rousing music sprang up and the crowds receded so swiftly it was as if they had practiced it beforehand. Before long, a clear, orderly path had appeared. And standing right in the middle of that path...

“The champion of last year’s Beast King Drinking Festival has once again made the journey all the way from the Village of Elves! The champion of champions with an illustrious record, said to have obtained runner-up position in the Western Continent Drinking Competition from the day he took his first drink as a youth! The king of kings within the world of veteran drinkers! Everyone, put your hands together for...Elder of the Village of Elves, Nellas-samaaaa!”

Cheers and applause thundered, rocking the venue. The elven Elder proceeded down the path that had been opened up for him, reminiscent of a pro wrestler's entrance or the arrival of a hero.

Bewilderment filled Kelvin's face. "Uh...that's the Elder from the Village of Elves, right? What's he doing here? He drinks?"

"He seems really popular," Rion commented.

The screams of support from the audience filled the air as Nellas made his way to his assigned seat. Before sitting down, he turned around and gave a huge wave in response to the cheering. There was no need to even ask who the crowd favorite was.

"Champion Nellas! May we have a word from you, please?"

"It appears my competition today is significantly stiffer than it has been in previous years. Even so, I have absolutely no intention of yielding my crown. I shall be victorious no matter what wine is served today!"

"What a confident declaration indeed!"

Clapping, cheering, and whistling roared up once again.

"The person I think will win is Grandpa Nellas, an elven Elder! Based on the data from previous years, he has the highest chance of winning by far!"

"So he's your favorite, huh, Shutola? Well, he does look young."

"I don't like how you worded that, dear brother!"

Leaving aside the question of where Shutola had gotten access to such records, all the participants for the event were now gathered: Gerard, who looked deflated from being told not to drink too much by his grandchildren; Sabato, whom no one really expected to win; Guin, who had already dropped out; Goldiana, who was there more for Gerard than the prize; Melfina, who was waiting in anticipation of the snacks that would be served; and lastly, Nellas, last year's champion. It was quite the lineup.

"Ladies and gentlemen, here are all the leading actors of today's festivity. Give a hand to these five brave competitors!"

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

“I’m not surprised, but Guin sure left the picture quickly.”

“Skipping work is bad! Mommy always scolds Huba for it!”

“Huba...skips work?”

The unexpected fact that he had a servant slacking off on the job left Kelvin reeling a little as he went through the motions of joining the storm of clapping going on. The applause was filled with enthusiasm and took a while to subside, showing just how much expectation was in the air.

“Thank you! Thank you! Now that we’re all fired up, let’s move on to explaining the rules! The drink this year is the famous label that represents our country, Juuoushu! Yes, that distinctive drink that is so powerful, it is easily classified as firewater! The one who drinks the most within the allotted time will be the winner! The winner will earn the title of champion, a year’s supply of Juuoushu, and the coveted glass tankard said to once belong to Bakke-sama, the first ever winner of this long-lasting and illustrious competition!”

The beastkin grew even more impassioned after hearing about the generous prizes. In contrast, Kelvin found himself at a loss, not quite understanding the value of what was being promised.

“Who’s Bakke?”

“If I remember correctly, she’s the queen consort of a country on the Western Continent. She happened to take part in this event during her adventuring days,” Shutola replied.

“God, why are royals in this world all such weirdos? So, I guess this glass tankard is valuable because it was once used by someone famous? That it?”

Rion shrugged. “I guess it’s the kind of thing that’s only valuable to people who know how to appreciate it. Oh my god, look at that! That’s crazy!”

Following Rion’s excited gestures, Kelvin turned to see staff carrying in the wine that was to be consumed and the containers the contestants were supposed to drink from. The latter was what had grabbed Rion’s attention, as they were practically barrels. As these empty containers that could fit an entire adult were steadily filled with Juuoushu, the powerful stench of alcohol wafted all the way to the stands. Kelvin made the split-second decision to deploy a

White Magic barrier around his group's seats, which completely purified the fumes. Then he wholeheartedly thanked Melfina the Goddess in his heart for Sera not being here. If she had come along, this whole venue would have been covered with blood. Mainly his, that was.

"Has everyone received their tankards? These gigantic handmade tankards were specially ordered by the competition organizers just for today! The aromatic woody fragrance is the absolute perfect match for Juuoushu! Contestants, do you feel your saliva flowing already?!"

The huge tankards now heavy with wine were plunked down in front of each contestant in turn. The crowd got even more riled up, no one seeming bothered by the ridiculous quantities.

Kelvin murmured, "We're used to it from seeing Mel eat, but how are these guys not shaken by that? That's just... Wow."

"Aha ha, Kel-nii, I think Sabato-san's freaking out a little."

"You're right, Rion-chan! He's sweating buckets!"

"My predictions tell me the chances of Prince Sabato winning are as slim as those of big sister Mel going on a fast."

At times, children say the most hurtful things. They have no qualms about directly pointing out stuff that everyone else is pretending not to see.

"The amount of Juuoushu in each barrel is the same! The weight of each barrel is also the same! When the time comes, we'll weigh each barrel to see how much is remaining in each. Contestants, do your best to finish them off! Any questions? No ques—"

"Excuse me." Melfina raised her hand, her face the very picture of seriousness.

"Yes? What is the matter?"

"My snacks aren't here yet. I requested an amount proportionate to the wine."

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry."

Ronove asked the servers to arrange the snacks. A short while later, a huge

plate piled with a mountain of cheeses and smoked fish was carried out. While the other contestants each had a huge barrel sitting before them, Mel now had a massive pile of snacks as well, leaving her hidden from sight. Her voice, however, was still audible.

“Heh heh, *now* things have gotten interesting. This is truly a mountain worth conquering!”

Kelvin brought a hand to his forehead. “By ‘mountain,’ she’s probably referring to...”

“The snacks!” Ruka and Shutola replied in unison as Rion chuckled wryly.

“Of course she is,” Kelvin said, heaving a sigh.

Once again, the air of the venue was charged with tension. Many of the contestants peered into their containers, raring to go. When the suspense reached its peak, Ronove raised a hand.

“Everyone, are you ready?! It’s now time to drink as much Juuoushu as you can! Without further ado, the Beast King Drinking Festival starts...NOW!”

The instant Ronove gave the signal, Gerard, Sabato, and Melfina lifted their giant tankards by the handles and started pouring the contents down their throats. The weight of the barrels made the very act of drinking a challenge in and of itself, one which these three managed handily. Their barrels steadily tilted at a good pace, indicating how quickly they were drinking the contents.

“Ohhh! The competition starts off on fire right out of the gate! Everyone has managed to lift their— No! Goldiana-sama and Nellas-sama have shown no movement! Whatever could be the problem?!”

In sharp contrast to the burst of activity shown by the other three, Goldiana and Nellas had yet to even reach for their barrels. Everyone looked on as Goldiana moved first. He put a hand down the front of his outfit.

“L-Ladies and gentlemen, Goldiana-sama has taken out a large teacup! And he’s... Look at that! He’s scooping the wine from the barrel with it! And...he’s drinking it with elegant motions!”

“Is she going to describe everything that’s going on?” Kelvin retorted to no

one in particular.

The person who presumably had the highest Strength stat among all the contestants was, of all things, scooping out the alcohol and drinking it gracefully instead of lifting the whole container. This was, naturally, extremely inefficient and put his pace far behind those of the three who were drinking directly from the barrel.



“Um, Goldiana-sama? Would it not be better to lift the tankard like the others are doing?”

“Oh no, dearie, that’s entirely out of the question. As a lady, I simply couldn’t act so coarsely in front of so many eyes. Especially not when Gerard-sama’s watching!” Goldiana replied, blushing furiously.

“Pffpaah! *Cough, cough!*” Gerard, who had been in the lead, suddenly choked heavily. The attack had taken him entirely by surprise and dealt a significant amount of damage.

“For some reason, Gerard-sama has started coughing violently! Could this be his old age acting up?!”

“Th-That caught me off guard!”

“He’s lost almost twenty seconds! This is a great loss! Can he really recover from this?! Wait, Nellas-sama...”

While everyone’s attention had been directed towards Goldiana and Gerard, Nellas had started moving. Past champion or not, he was an elf, and elves did not have very high Strength in general. Lifting the entire barrel of wine was beyond him, so he adopted a unique strategy.

“A-Are you seeing what I’m seeing?! Nellas-sama has plunged his head *inside* his barrel!”

If he couldn’t move the barrel, he simply had to dive in himself. While a lesser man might have wanted to be hidden when doing this, Nellas had not hesitated in the slightest. Although those right in front could not see what was happening inside that barrel, the sound of his drinking was certainly audible. What’s more, his body was slipping further and further into the barrel, indicating the rate at which the level of wine inside was lowering.

“What an incredible display! Methods aside, Nellas-sama is going through his barrel so fast, he just might catch up to Mel-sama and Sabato-sama, the two currently in the lead! There is truly no telling how this competition will turn out!”

“Phew. I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“Huh?! M-Mel-sama has lowered her barrel! Don’t tell me...”

“Give me a second barrel please!”

“SHE’S FINISHED IT!!!”

Indeed, Mel had completely emptied her tankard.

“I can’t believe this! Mel-sama actually finished all that Juuoushu! Staff, bring another one over! Quickly!”

“Oh, and bring me seconds of the snacks too!”

“WHAT?!”

What had previously hidden Melfina’s entire figure had been reduced to an empty barrel and clean plate. Not only had Melfina finished her wine, she had also devoured every last morsel of the food before her.

“When did you finish eating?! Staff, bring more snacks too! On the double!”

At that moment, Nellas’s face popped back up from inside his barrel, and he raised his hand. “May I have another as well?”

“Pfah! Have I caught back up?” Gerard asked almost at the same time, also raising his hand.

The two turned to glare at each other, sparks flying in between despite sitting on opposite ends of the table.

“Gerard-san, I did think you a rather hearty drinker during the feast at our village, but never did I imagine you capable of keeping up with me. You sure do make this fun!”

“You took the words right out of my mouth. I had never imagined I would meet anyone other than Princess who could match my pace.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, the sparks are flying, and the heat is turning up! The competition this year is truly on fire! Oh? Right underneath the sparks, Sabato-sama does not seem to be moving. Has he been knocked out by the overwhelming pressure being exerted on all sides?”

Silence greeted the commentator.

“No response?! Medics, check up on him now!”

Several beastkin rushed towards Sabato, who had stopped moving while hugging his barrel. They lowered the barrel and looked into his face, then shook their heads.

“The whites of his eyes are showing. He’s unconscious!”

“S-Sabato-sama has departed! He has departed without any of us realizing it!”

As Ronove joked about it, Sabato was carried away on a stretcher. He had given it his all but had nothing to show for it.

One of the spectators wiped away a tear. “We sure lost a good man today. Of course, logically, attempting to down that amount of wine is sheer madness in the first place!”

“Now that you mention it... But hey, I can’t say I dislike a prince who bravely faces a challenge even though he knows it’s beyond him!” his neighbor replied.

The mood in the venue suddenly turned solemn as everyone’s thoughts turned to their fallen hero.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Mel-sama’s refill has just arrived! And so have her snacks! Both are being placed in front of her as a set!”

“Whoaaaaa! You got this, The Smile!”

“Damn, the food started disappearing the moment the plate was put down!”

“Hurry up and bring the champion his wine too!”

The temperature in the air shot right back up again. The beastkin definitely knew how to change gears quickly. Kelvin, who was having trouble acclimating to the violent ups and downs, could only smile wryly.

“Well...Sabato did his best, I’ll give him that.”

“I-I guess, aha ha...”

“Good luck, Grandpa Gerard!”

“My data told me this would happen!”

When Kelvin looked at Ruka and Shutola, he came to a realization—namely, that the only true “winner” at an event is someone who fully enjoys it.

“The clock is ticking down! It’s make-or-break time! Mel-sama is in the lead, but the two veterans seem to be catching up! As for Goldiana-sama—”

“Mm, what a marvelous aroma... Yes? You called?”

Goldiana was enjoying a very elegant moment, pouring tea into his teacup with a slice of shortcake sitting in his lap.

“Where did you pull all that out from?!”

“Oh my, do you really want to know?”

“Actually, I can kind of imagine, so I’m good! But in spite of everything he’s got going on, Goldiana-sama has still drunk more wine than Sabato-sama! Can you believe it?! However, his distance behind the top three is significant! Clearly, those with a chance at the prizes have been narrowed down to Mel-sama, Nellas-sama, and Gerard-sama! And even as I speak, time is running out! This is the moment for one last push!”

The plate before Melfina was already empty, meaning she only had Juuoushu to focus on now. Gerard also had his barrel tilted high up, making that last run for the finish line. Half of Nellas was obscured from view as he continued employing his strategy from earlier. They were truly neck and neck. The competition would be decided by whoever managed to finish their barrel first.

In the midst of this white-hot race, Goldiana suddenly turned to Gerard and said supportingly, “Go for broke, Gerard-sama!” He winked one time, then a second. Pink hearts appeared and flew over the empty seats in a gentle curve, aiming straight for Gerard, who was just about to finish.

“GYAHHHH?!”

Both of them were direct hits. The hearts filled one hundred percent with love sent the knight flying backwards with violent force.

“G-Gerard-sama was sent flyiiiiing!” Ronove exclaimed as both Ruka and Shutola cried, “Grandpa Gerard!”

Kelvin shuddered. “Here I was, wondering why the pink heart is always visible. Turns out it was an actual physical attack. Oof, that’s terrifying.”

“Can you call it ‘a physical approach’ instead?” Goldiana returned.

The impact was so strong that Gerard had been buried deep within the wall. He showed no sign of coming back out.

“Medics!” Ronove cried. “Hurry and save Gerard-sama!”

Goldiana leaped up. “No, there’s no need! With how deep he is inside the wall, I’m the most suitable for helping him!”

Ronove faltered. “Um, in that case...”

“No! That’s the one thing I can’t handle!” With loud sounds of crumbling, Gerard suddenly extracted himself from the wall and took off at a dash.

“You shouldn’t be running, Gerard-sama! You might be hurt somewheere! Let me diagnose youuuu!” Goldiana also disappeared before anyone noticed, taking off in pursuit of the knight. The sight of him running was much less elegant than...artistic. The world’s greatest muscles bunched up, swelled, and bulged as they burst into movement.

In any case, Gerard and Goldiana were out of the competition.

“I-It feels like a typhoon just came and went, but let’s get our heads back in the competition! Only two contestants remain! No matter who wins, this will soon be over! Make sure to keep your eyes open, ladies and gentlemen! Get fired up like you’ve never been!”

“YAAAAHHHHHH!”

Thanks to Ronove’s follow-up, the odd incident was promptly forgotten as the excitement in the venue peaked.

“Looks like commentators have it tough too.”

“I guess so.”

There was no time to waste feeling sentimental. Melfina drank! And Nellas dove! The time ticked, ticked, tick—

“IT’S OVERRRRR!”

The competition came to an end.

“Not too shabby,” Melfina commented.

“I could say the same of you,” Nellas returned.

Ronove gasped loudly. “I-It looks like...both barrels are empty!”

There wasn’t a single drop of liquid left in either the barrel Melfina lowered or the one Nellas had crawled back out of.

“A shocking tie! A shocking double win! However, the prize is one of a kind! That leaves us—”

“No, she is the winner,” Nellas interrupted quietly but firmly, placing a hand on the edge of his empty tankard.

“Huh? Wh-What do you mean, Nellas-sama?” Ronove asked.

“Is it not obvious to you? Mel-san here tied with me while also eating. From what I saw, what she ate was around the same amount as what she drank. To call this result a tie would be far too brazen of me. A true champion is one who far outstrips the competition. This old bag of bones will be going into retirement as of today. However, do not be sad! This is the start of a new era, with a new wind blowing through the scene!”

“So you mean to say, the winner—”

“Is Mel-san! Congratulations, Mel-san! I look forward to seeing what you will achieve as the queen who spearheads this next generation!”

Cheers, hurrahs, whistles, and applause exploded, rocking the venue. Mel and Nellas exchanged a firm handshake in appreciation of each other’s performances. Soon, a golden trophy in the shape of a wine bottle was carried in. Melfina held this symbol of a drinking sovereign high up above her head, the most heavenly smile gracing her face.

“You sure drank like a champ, The Smile!”

“And ate like one too!”

“Congratulations, big sister Mel!”

“Good work out there. So, who’s the year’s supply of wine for?”

“Mel-nee, you were super cool!”

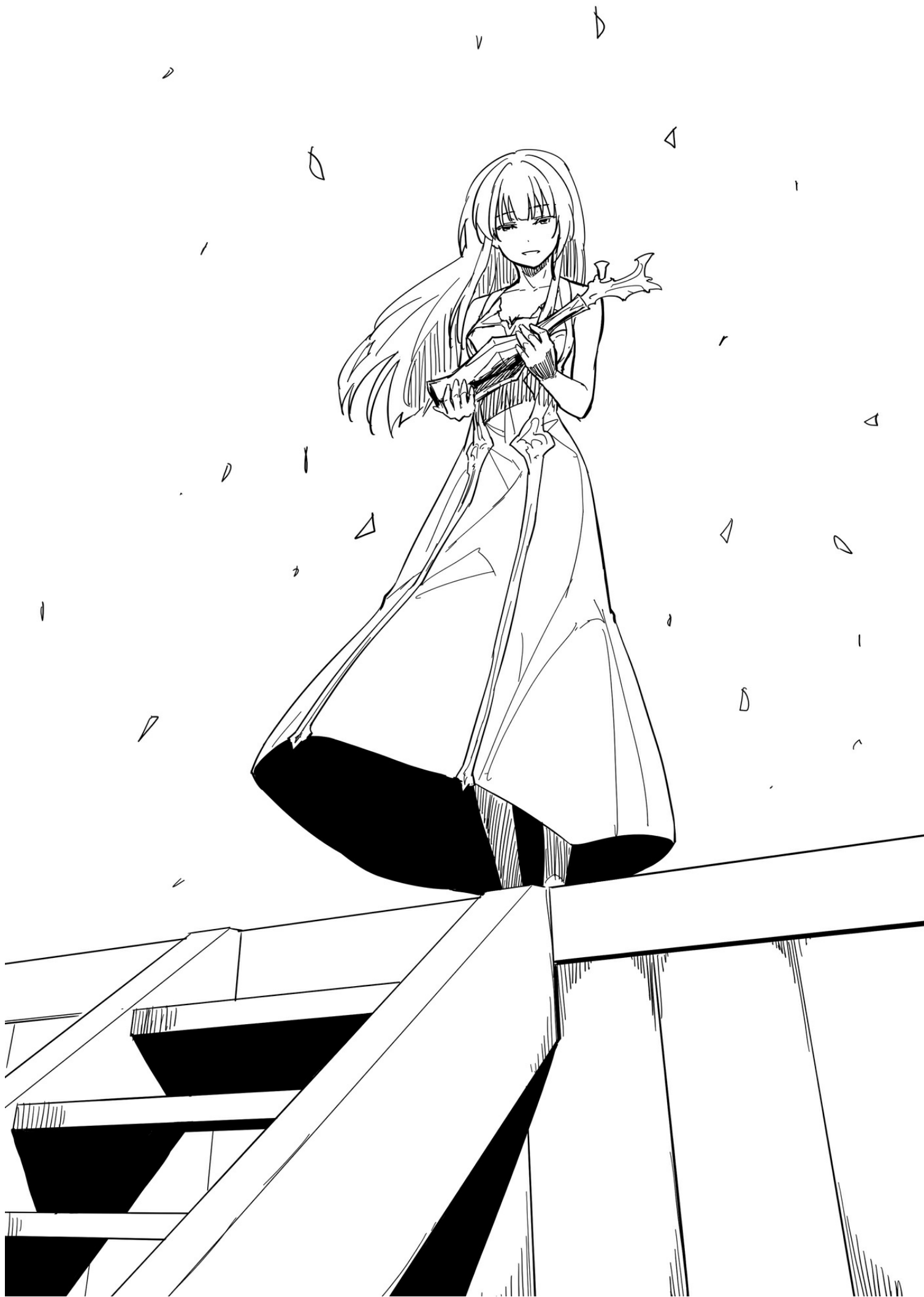
“Thank you, everyone! Thank you!”

The fired-up competition filled with twists and turns was finally over with the

crowning of a new champion. Thanks to this, the name “The Smile” spread like wildfire beyond the boundaries of the competitive eating world as a living legend, the invincible goddess who could make all food and drink disappear with but a wave of a hand.

“Lastly, can we have a final word from our winner? Mel-sama, go ahead!”

“Of course! My nerves have left me feeling slightly peckish again, so I’m going to pay a few of the stalls around here a visit!”



Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing *Black Summoner 6: The Red Maidens*. I'm again low on page space for the afterword for this volume, so I'll be forgoing my introduction this time too.

Happy New Year! A year goes by so fast. And right out of the gate this year, here we are with the sixth volume of this series. The story corresponds to the first half of *Arc 6: Beast King Festival* from the web novel. It's been a while since I've had the opportunity to write so many slice-of-life scenes in this series, and I think I did a good job making it fun. That said, it's not as if our battle junkie would sit still, so this volume has a great mix of both slice-of-life and battles, interspersed with the introduction of new characters here and there. Ruka finally got an art insert of her own, and the mysterious Bahl showed up. This girl who will be playing a part in the next volume seems to bear an uncanny resemblance to... Nah, that can't be right. However, I have taken a liking to her.

Oh, there's something we really have to talk about! The manga! This series has finally gotten a manga publication! I've been told that by the time this volume is on sale, the manga should have begun streaming on the Comic Gardo site. The battle scenes have been given special attention, so I hope you enjoy reading it!

With that, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone's warm hands, praying that we will meet again next volume.

Doufu Mayoi

■ KELVIN CELSIUS

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / HUMAN/ SUMMONER

■ LEVEL: 120

■ TITLE: GRIM REAPER

■ HP: 1,960/1,960

■ MP: 18,120/18,120 (+12,080)

SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP - 100

SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP - 1,000

SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP -1,000

SUMMONING MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY):
MAX MP -5

SUMMONING ALEX: MAX MP -320

SUMMONING DAHAK: MAX MP -500

SUMMONING BOGA: MAX MP -500

SUMMONING MDOFARAK: MAX MP-500

■ STRENGTH: 1,224 (+640)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,157 (+640)

■ AGILITY: 1,382

■ MAGIC: 2.825 (+640)

■ LUCK: 1,820

■ EQUIPMENT

BLACK DISASTER (RANK S)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA
(RANK S)

ASTARTE'S EMBRACE (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

FAUX HOLY SWORD CLIVE (RANK S)

SKILL EATER (RANK S)

BLOOD PENDANT (RANK S)

TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS
(RANK C)

■ SKILLS

MAGIC OVERCLOCK (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK S)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)

ANALYZE EYE (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK A)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK A)

SMITHING (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

EXPERIENCE SHARING

PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

SUMMONING (RANK S)

[AVAILABLE SLOTS: 2]

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)

SPIRIT (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

DOUBLE EXPERIENCE POINTS

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION

SKILL EATER (RIGHT)/GUSTATION (RANK S)

SKILL EATER (LEFT)/DUAL WIELD (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ EFIL

■ 16 Y/O / FEMALE / HALF-ELF / BATTLE MAID

■ LEVEL: 119

■ TITLE: BOMBING PRINCESS

■ HP: 1,108 / 1,108

■ MP: 3,463 / 3,463

■ STRENGTH: 503

■ ENDURANCE: 500

■ AGILITY: 3,306 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 2,639 (+640)

■ LUCK: 1,849 (+1,599)

■ EQUIPMENT

PENUMBRA (RANK S)

MERCILESS (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID UNIFORM V (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID HEADRESS V (RANK S)

MAGICAL JEWEL HAIR CLIP (RANK B)

SLAVE COLLAR (RANK D)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

FLAME DRAGON LEATHER BOOTS (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

BLUE FLAME (UNIQUE SKILL)

ARCHERY (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK S)

COVERT ACTION (RANK S)

SERVICE (RANK S)

COOKING (RANK S)

SEWING (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE FLAME

DRAGON KING

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

DIVINE RESTITUTION (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK C)

FARSIGHT (RANK S)

TEACHING (RANK A)

MASSAGE (RANK A)

DISCERNMENT (RANK S)

CLEANING (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS



■ CLOTHO

■ 0 Y/O / GENDERLESS / SLIME GLUTTONIA

■ LEVEL: 119

■ TITLE: EVERLASTING DARKNESS

■ HP: 2,380 / 2,380 (+100)

■ MP:1,877 / 1,877 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,441 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,402 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1,378 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 1,180 (+100)

■ LUCK: 1,333 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

NONE

■ SKILLS

GLUTTONY (UNIQUE SKILL)

METALICIZE (RANK S)

ABSORPTION (RANK A)

DIVISION (RANK A)

DISMANTLE (RANK S)

STORAGE (RANK S)

BLUNT DAMAGE INVULNERABILITY

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ GERARD

■ 138 Y/O / MALE / HADES KNIGHT CAPTAIN / DARK KNIGHT

■ LEVEL: 121

■ TITLE: SWORD GURU

■ HP: 12,700 / 12,700 (+8,400) (+100)

■ MP: 527 / 527 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 2,803 (+640) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 2,939 (+640) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 501 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 398 (+100)

■ LUCK: 644 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD DAINSLEIF (RANK S)

DREADNOUGHT (RANK A)

CRIMSON MANTLE (RANK B)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

GLORY WITHIN MINE HANDS
(UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

RIDING (RANK S)

MILITARY TACTIC (RANK B)

AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

MATERIALIZATION

SLICING DAMAGE RESISTANCE

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE
(UNIQUE SKILL)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

ARMORED SKIN (RANK S)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)

TEACHING (RANK A)

FORTITUDE (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

DARK DAMAGE RESISTANCE

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/DEMON SWORD DAINSLEIF++

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/DREADNOUGHT++

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/CRIMSON MANTLE++

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/GODDESS'S RING++

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SERA

■ 21 Y/O / FEMALE / DEMON BLOOD LORD / CURSED PUGILIST

■ LEVEL: 120

■ TITLE: EMPRESS

■ HP: 3,085/3,085 (+100)

■ MP: 3,250/3,250 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,787 (+320) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,202 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1,386 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 1,909 (+100)

■ LUCK: 2,221 (+640) (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

ARONDIGHT (RANK S)

QUEEN'S TERROR (RANK S)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE (RANK A)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

STRENGTHENED MITHRIL GREAVES (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

BLOOD DOMINION (UNIQUE SKILL)

BLOODBENDING (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK S)

SERVICE (RANK C)

DANCING (RANK A)

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE (RANK A)

FISHING (RANK A)

AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

SUPER LUCK (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DEMON LORD

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY)

- 17 Y/O / FEMALE / ANGEL / VALKYRIE
- LEVEL: 120
- TITLE: SMILE
- HP: 3,509~4,069 (+3,142~3,702)
- MP: 3,509~4,069 (+3,142~3,702)

- STRENGTH: 3,509~4,069 (+3,142~3,702)
- ENDURANCE: 3,509~4,069 (+3,142~3,702)
- AGILITY: 3,509~4,069 (+3,142~3,702)
- MAGIC: 3,509~4,069 (+3,142~3,702)
- LUCK: 3,509~4,069 (+3,142~3,702)

■ EQUIPMENT

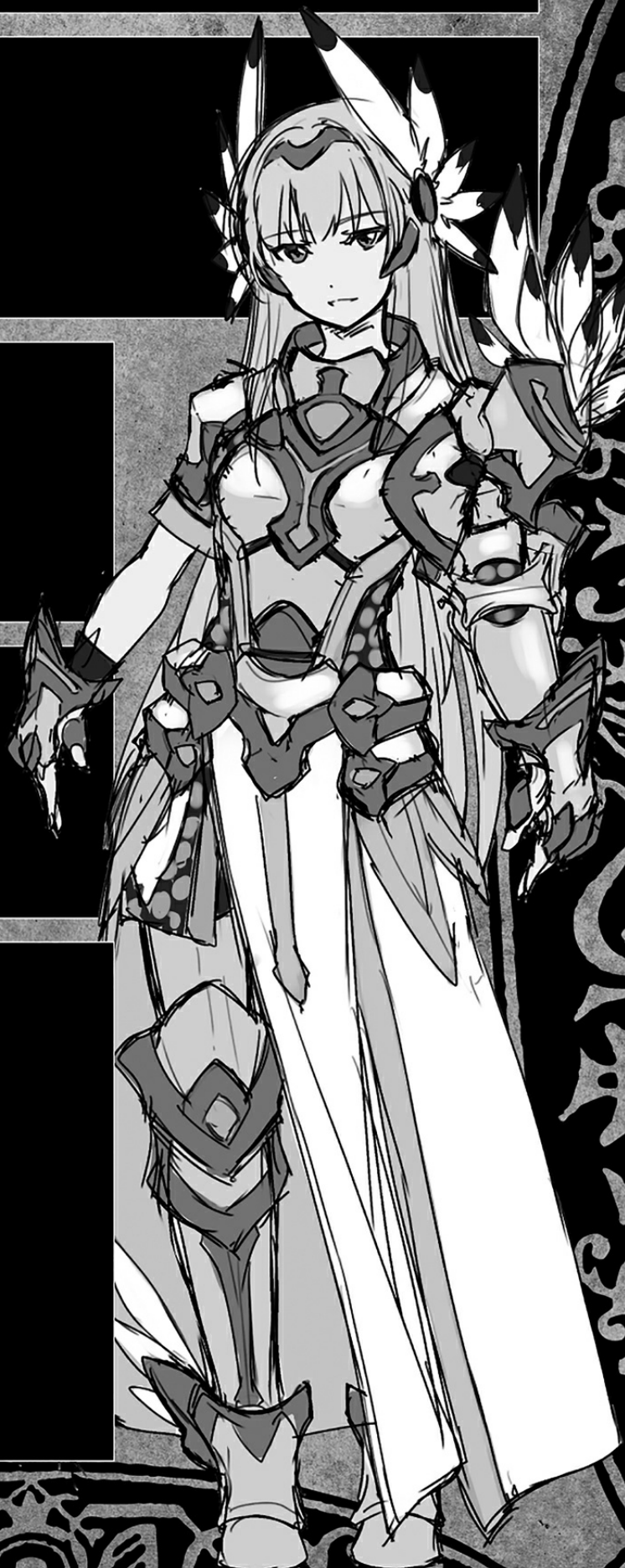
HOLY SPEAR LUMINARY (RANK S)
VALKYRIE MAIL (RANK S)
VALKYRIE HELM (RANK S)
GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)
ETHER GREAVES (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

DIVINE BINDING (HIDDEN SKILL)
SYMPATHETIC RESONANCE (UNIQUE SKILL)
SPEAR MASTERY (RANK S)
MIND'S EYE (RANK S)
BLUE MAGIC (RANK S)
WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)
FLIGHT (RANK S)
MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK S)
ACCESSORY CRAFTSMANSHIP (RANK S)
ALCHEMY (RANK S)
HEARTY EATING (RANK S)
STEEL STOMACH (RANK S)
GUSTATION (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ RION CELSIUS

■ 14 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / SWORD SAINT

■ LEVEL: 114

■ TITLE: BLACK METEOR

■ HP: 1,480/1,480

■ MP: 2,399/2,399

■ STRENGTH: 1,332

■ ENDURANCE: 690 (+320)

■ AGILITY: 2,815 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 2,204 (+640)

■ LUCK: 1,367

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD CALADBOLG (RANK S)

FAUX HOLY SWORD WILL (RANK A)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA (RANK S) X 2

BLACK RECESS (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

RESIDUAL SLICE

(UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

ACROBATICS (RANK S)

SKY WALK (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

PAINTING (RANK B)

EMPATHY (RANK B)

VIGOR (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

ABSOLUTE PURIFICATION

(UNIQUE SKILL)

DUAL WIELD (RANK S)

COVERT ACTION (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK A)

COMPANIONSHIP (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK A)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT

(RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ ALEX

■ 3 Y/O / MALE / HRÓÐVITNIR

■ LEVEL: 114

■ TITLE: HEAT HAZE

■ HP: 2,077 / 2,077 (+100)

■ MP: 777 / 777 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,347 (+320) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 855 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1,043 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 622 (+100)

■ LUCK: 563 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

LETHAL OPIATE SWORD

(RANK S)

GODDESS'S COLLAR

(RANK S)

■ SKILLS

SHADOW TRAVEL (UNIQUE SKILL)

CREEPING DARKNESS (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

ACROBATICS (RANK S)

OLFACTION (RANK S)

COVERT ACTION (RANK A)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK B)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING / MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ DAHAK

■ 162 Y/O / MALE / BLACK DRAGON (ANCIENT) / FARMER

■ LEVEL: 113

■ TITLE: GIANT FARMER

■ HP: 2,406/2,406 (+100)

■ MP: 605/605 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,170 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 911 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 578 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 927 (+100)

■ LUCK: 337 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (HUMAN FORM)

ADAMANTITE HOE (RANK A)

BATTLE WORK CLOTHES III (RANK B)

WORK BOOTS (RANK E)

DRAGON'S TOWEL (RANK F)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)

DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

GODDESS'S COLLAR (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

GEMMATION (UNIQUE SKILL)

BLACK SOIL SCALES (UNIQUE SKILL)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK A)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK F)

BREATH (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK C)

AGRICULTURE (RANK S)

HORTICULTURE (RANK S)

CONSTRUCTION (RANK A)

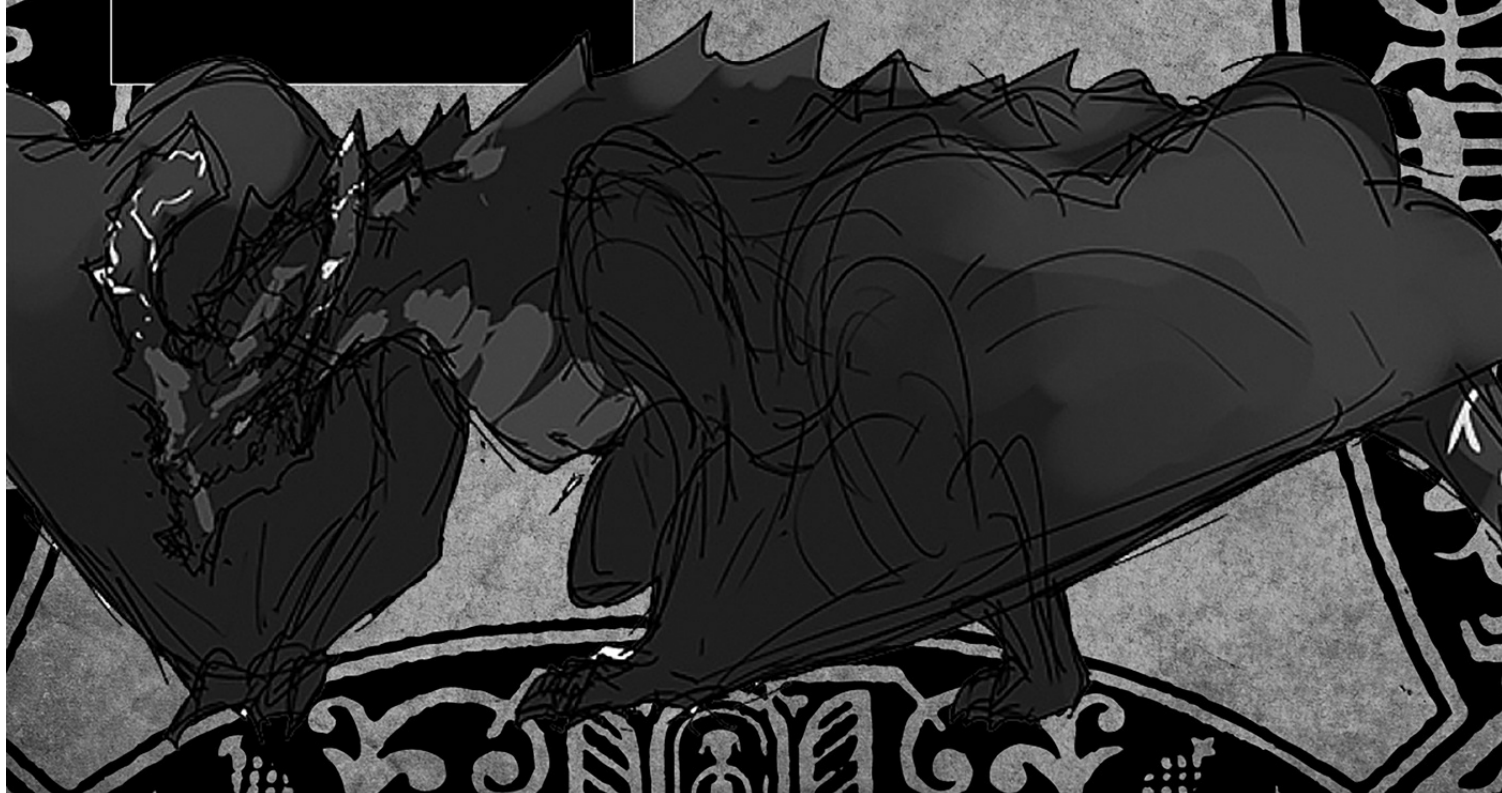
CONVERSATION (RANK D)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DARKNESS DRAGON KING

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ BOGA

■ 103 Y/O / MALE / ROCK DRAGON (ANCIENT)

■ LEVEL: 110

■ TITLE: SWORD GURU'S FAVORITE DRAGON

■ HP: 4,095/4,095 (+1,365) (+100)

■ MP: 228/228 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,449 (+160) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,472 (+160) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 764 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 212(+100)

■ LUCK: 398 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)

DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

BREATH (RANK D)

ARMORED SKIN (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK D)

BURROWING (RANK A)

THUNDEROUS VOICE (RANK C)

FORTITUDE (RANK B)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK B)

IRON WALL (RANK B)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MDOFARAK

■ 63 Y/O / FEMALE / THREE-HEADED DRAGON (ANCIENT)

■ LEVEL: 107

■ TITLE: SWEET-TOOTHED SNIPER

■ HP: 1,873/1,873 (+100)

■ MP: 1,510/1,510 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 697 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 664 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 584 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 819 (+100)

■ LUCK: 806 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)

DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

MULTI-ELEMENTAL CONSTITUTION
(UNIQUE SKILL)

BREATH (RANK S)

FARSIGHT (RANK B)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

CONCENTRATION (RANK A)

MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK A)

MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK A)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ RUKA

■ 10 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / APPRENTICE MAID

■ LEVEL: 94

■ TITLE: SWORD GURU'S GRANDDAUGHTER

■ HP: 316/316

■ MP: 277/277

■ STRENGTH: 202

■ ENDURANCE: 112

■ AGILITY: 390

■ MAGIC: 99

■ LUCK: 438

■ EQUIPMENT

RE-STRENGTHENED MITHRIL DAGGER (RANK A)

ASSASSIN'S KNIFE (RANK A)

APPRENTICE MAID UNIFORM IV (RANK A)

APPRENTICE MAID HEADDRESS IV (RANK A)

ASSASSIN'S BOOTS (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

SWORD MASTERY (RANK A)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK D)

ACROBATICS (RANK D)

COVERT ACTION (RANK D)

SERVICE (RANK F)

COOKING (RANK B)

SEWING (RANK F)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ BAHL

■ 00 Y/O / FEMALE / 00000 00000 0000 / CALCITRIST

■ LEVEL: 000

■ TITLE: 0000000000

■ HP: 0,000/0,000

■ MP: 0,000/0,000

■ STRENGTH: 0,000

■ ENDURANCE: 0,000

■ AGILITY: 0,000

■ MAGIC: 0,000

■ LUCK: 0,000

■ EQUIPMENT

00000000 (RANK S)

000000000'0 00000 (RANK S)

HALLELA BAGUE (RANK A)

0000 00 0000000000 (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

00000 0000000000 (UNIQUE SKILL)
COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

...

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

000000000 00 000 000000 0000

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

000000000 (RANK 0)



Bonus Short Stories

Kelvin, the Three Girls, and Meat Skewers

After a certain event involving a lot of alcohol was over, Kelvin had a stroll around Gaun with Rion, Shutola, and Ruka. Melfina and Gerard had been with them earlier on but then left because they had other things to do. It would take too long to go into the details of what it was that had pulled them away, so we shall leave that out for now.

“Oh, it’s the meat skewer place from yesterday! Kel-nii, over there! That one!”

“What? You wanted to eat some, Rion?”

“Master, Master! I want some too!”

“Um, if I’m honest, so do I, dearest brother.”

The three girls, who were currently going through growth spurts, seemed to have been drawn by the mouthwatering scents given off by the skewers in the hands of the people walking ahead of them. Just yesterday, the same fate had befallen Melfina, prompting Kelvin to order twenty portions for her. The other girls had probably held themselves back out of consideration for how tired the stall owner was.

“But that skewer is pretty big, isn’t it? It’s American-sized... Or I guess it makes more sense to call it Gaunian-sized. None of you have an appetite like Mel’s. Are you sure you each want one?”

“Don’t worry, dearest brother. Those skewers all have three blocks of meat on them, and there are three of us. It’s true we may not be able to finish an entire skewer each, but we can definitely finish one together!”

“Shutola-chan’s so smart! Master, I can eat one block!”

“And Kel-nii, if push comes to shove, we have you to finish it if we really can’t.”

“Fair enough. I *do* actually have space in my stomach right now. All right. Give us one skewer please, sir.”

Kelvin, who had acquiesced to the girls’ pleas, turned to the stall owner and placed an order.

“O-Oh, you’re from yesterday...” The owner, who apparently remembered Kelvin due to how impactful the previous incident had been, looked slightly shaken. “A-Are you sure you don’t need to add a zero to your order, sir?”

“Nah, we’re good today. It’s these girls here who’ll be eating it.”

“Please grill it nice and yummy for us, mister!”

“Yummy!”

“Please and thank you!”

“What cute customers we have here! You got it. I’ll put my heart into grilling this one!”

The beastkin man was considerate enough to put each block of meat onto separate skewers. The juices sizzled with such a heavenly melody and fragrance that everyone nearby immediately began salivating. When he was done, he wrapped each portion in a large leaf and handed them over. The girls happily accepted them and leaped about in sheer excitement.

The group quickly found a place to sit. There was just no beating the experience of eating a meat skewer while sitting on a bench.

“So yumyyyyy!” all three cried in unison.

Kelvin watched his companions warmly, thinking about how enjoyable such moments were too.

“Here you go, Kel-nii.”

“Hm? You’re already full?”

“Nope, I just want to share. Say ‘ahhh...’”

“Ha ha, what an Efil-like thing to do. Ahhh...nom.”

“What?! We’re pretending to be Efil-sama?! Master, I wanna do it too! Master, say ‘ahhh!’”

“Um, um, d-do I have to do it too? Dearest brother, um, please say ‘ahhh...’”

At the time, Kelvin thought he heard Gerard’s tearful roar in the distance, but he decided to pay it no mind. Instead, he focused on enjoying the half-eaten morsels thrust before him.

“Mm, this really is delicious...”

Efil, Ellie, and Curing a Hangover

“Eurghh...I feel so sick...” Sera moaned like a zombie.

The day after unwittingly getting thoroughly plastered and going on a huge rampage, she woke up with a splitting headache that she thought would kill her. Gone was her usual energy, replaced by torturous moans and groans, with her face permanently twisted in agony.

“What should we do, Efil-sama?” Ellie asked.

“Congee is best for hangovers,” Efil replied. “We will have to start by selecting the best ingredients. Come with me to the market.”

“Understood. Shall I bring Ruka as well?”

“No, we’ll let Ruka accompany Rion-sama and Shutola-sama. They’re all at the age when they would prefer playing with each other, so let’s leave them that time.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Efil-sama. But the way I see it, you have just as much right to play as they do. I was much rowdier when I was sixteen.”

“I-I have Master, so I can do without playing. Oh no, look at the time! If we take too long, Sera-san just might pass away for real. We must hurry!”

Efil bustled off, her cheeks blushing slightly as Ellie looked on with a warm smile. The two headed for the marketplace in search of high-quality ingredients.



“Oh dear, we ended up buying too much.”

“You become far too enthusiastic when you see rare ingredients, Efil-sama.”

About an hour later, the two maids returned to the inn. They stared at everything they had bought, all laid out on the counter in the kitchen they had borrowed, realizing they had gone just a little too far. However, food wouldn't ever go bad inside Clotho's Storage, and there was no such thing as "too much food" with Melfina around, so there wasn't much of a problem.

"Well then, let's begin cooking. Ellie, can you fetch me the miso in Clo-chan's Storage?"

"Here you go."

The pair got to work. Although Ellie was more than twice as old as Efil, she knew for an absolute fact that the younger girl was by far her superior in working as a maid, especially when in the kitchen. Ellie had much, much more experience with actually cooking, but the difference in proficiency was so remarkable that this detail didn't seem to matter. The moment Efil picked up a knife, ingredients on her cutting board shone with a blinding light, throbbed with life, and leaped with energy. Or at least, that always seemed to be the case—that was just how incredible it was watching her cook.

I feel like I'm starting to faintly hear the ingredients speaking to me as of late... No, I must be imagining it. I'm imagining things.

This power of Efil's even affected those cooking with her, greatly expanding the range of what they were capable of. Ellie knew that her food always came out more delicious whenever she made it alongside Efil, even if the other girl never even touched the dish in person.

"We have finished."

"It's shining, Efil-sama."

"Is it? It appears normal to me."

Ellie thought she saw the congee in the bowl giving off a golden-yellow glow. Was it a visual hallucination, or was it real? She felt like if she let down her guard, she would even see a halo.

Without further ado, the two brought the dish up to Sera's room.

"Ugh..."

“Sera-san, we made you congee. Please open your mouth. Say ‘ahhh...’”

“Ahhh...” Sera feebly opened her mouth, prompting Efil to feed her some congee with a wooden spoon. After chewing slowly and swallowing, the demon opened her mouth again, asking for the next spoonful of her own volition this time.

“Ahhh...”

“Here you go.”

After this exchange was repeated a few more times, the bowl was entirely empty.

“I’ve recovered! Your congee really does wonders, Efil! Thank you!”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Even a severe hangover was no match against a bowl of Efil’s congee. It was Ellie’s goal to catch up to Efil’s cooking ability and one day make food that equally outstripped even medicine in recuperative efficacy.

Today, too, Sera proved unnecessarily full of energy.

Sera, Cake, and Hot Milk

Due to unavoidable circumstances, Sera ended up with a terrible hangover that left her in what seemed like eternal agony until Efil’s handmade congee finally liberated her. Once freed, she leaped out of bed, charged with energy, and went off in search of Kelvin. However, he had apparently gone out. Gerard, Melfina, and the three young girls were absent as well.

“Where did everyone go, leaving me behind?!”

Sera huffed in indignation, having already forgotten about the dozens of times she had nearly killed Kelvin the previous night. However, there was no point crying over spilled milk. The demon girl instantly changed gears, then realized she was feeling peckish. The only thing she had eaten was Efil’s congee. Although her appetite wasn’t all that large, that one bowl had not been enough to fill her up. Efil seemed to be occupied with teaching Ellie something, and Sera didn’t want to interrupt them. Consequently, the only option available was to

find food outside. Without hesitation, she headed out into the city.

“Extra! Extra! There was an upset at the annual Beast King Drinking Competition! Get your extra here!”

A beastkin hawker seemed to be selling a newspaper on a corner of a major avenue. Sera’s ears picked up the term “drinking competition.” Having woken up with the worst hangover in memory that very morning, she grimaced and firmly decided to steer well clear of the event.

“Oh, right, there’s that delicious confectionary café that Goldiana told me about the other day. It just so happens to be in the exact opposite direction from that drinking something-or-other too! I should go check it out as a potential date location with Kelvin!”

Having decided how to fill her stomach, Sera, who had a great memory, made a mental map based on what she had been told and set off at a brisk pace.

“This must be it!”

She did not make even one wrong turn. Upon arriving, she immediately grabbed a seat and checked out the menu that the waitress handed her.

“There’s a surprisingly large selection! Hmm...”

As her eyes scanned the page, a certain item caught her attention so strongly that her eyes widened. Named Blood Cake, it was a cake topped with a sauce made from blood orange and raspberry. This item, which looked like a cake covered in blood, had perfectly spoken to her sense of aesthetics as a demon. She turned to the waitress with sparkling eyes.

“Give me a Blood Cake!”

“Give me a Blood Cake!”

Another female voice happened to order the same thing at the very same time. Sera couldn’t see the other person, as the booths were separated by partitions, but the voice indicated that she was sitting back-to-back with the speaker. While mentally applauding the other girl for her marvelous taste in food, she considered what to drink.

I did just recover from a hangover, so I should probably get something that’s

easy on my stomach!

Having made up her mind, she pointed at the menu.

“Hot milk, please.”

“Hot milk, please.”

Even the waitress could not help but smile in response to such a rare coincidence. Sera nodded several times, impressed once again by the other girl's tastes.



“Phew. That was delicious. This place really is a gem!” Sera smiled with satisfaction, mentally thanking Goldiana for the recommendation. She resolved to bring Kelvin there someday, then finished off the last mouthful of milk in her glass.

“Check, please.”

“Check, please.”

A smile naturally came over Sera's face. It was quite a stroke of fortune meeting someone who was so in tune with her. The urge to peek over the partition flashed through her mind. However, because it would be rude to do so, she banished the thought. She actually had a surprisingly firm grasp of common sense, at least in comparison to the other members of Kelvin's party. Having decided to honor etiquette, she simply paid and walked out.

Sera headed back to the inn, her crimson hair billowing in the breeze. At the same time, a smaller girl exited the café, hair the same shade similarly blowing behind her.

“Huh? Did those two customers come separately? I definitely thought...”

“I know, right? They were so alike! Both their looks and orders!”

“Heeey, there're still lots of customers here! It's too early to stand around and chat!”

“Sorry, boss!”

Several days later, these two red maidens would meet again on the stage of

the Beast King Festival. Only they would know whether they ever learned what had happened today.

Dahak's Prettia-chan Observation Diary

The prideful black dragon, Dahak, eldest disciple of “Grim Reaper” Kelvin and son of the Darkness Dragon King, had something that he was struggling with. Nothing else had ever distressed him or shaken his heart like this in his more than hundred years of life as a dragon. Even now, in the middle of the Beast King Festival, he was hiding in a bush, crawling on all fours and writhing in agony.

“Ohhh, Prettia-chaaaan! You’re so pretty today, I think my eyes are burning up! Like, literally!”

This dragon in human form had taken advantage of the short break he had to come peek at “Peach Ogre” Goldiana Prettiana. He had used his own ability to grow a plant to hide himself in so that he could stare at Prettia elegantly enjoying a cup of tea. When taken this far, his actions very much bordered—no, were actually very much within the realm of stalking. If his target had been a normal girl, she just might have had him arrested.

“No, I need to gather myself. Being mesmerized by the sight of my beautiful goddess is fine and all, but I have to remember my duty. Today’s tea is...Darjeeling. Gotta write that down.”

Surprisingly, Dahak was capable of telling teas apart based on their color and fragrance alone. This was an ability he had picked up as a way to get closer to Prettia, who he thought loved tea above all other drinks. Every once in a while, he slipped away from the main group—some of those times, it was to train for this. Due to his ability to control nature, his compatibility with tea leaves was extremely high, and his efforts were paying off. Well, they were, but...if this was how he used this newfound ability of his, there was a case to be made that it was a pearl before swine.

“Hmm, so she’s drinking not just one tea today, but several. As expected of Prettia-chan, she’s so generous and impartial with her love even towards tea leaves! She’s so much more of a goddess than any other goddess!”

Dahak was a “real man,” so he was always direct with his words. However, if he went any further, he just might earn the ire of a real goddess, Melfina. So he simply focused on writing down today’s observations in his notebook, his face the very picture of seriousness.

At that moment, however, a mischievous wind passed by Prettia’s seat. His pretty pink skirt flew up with perfect timing. It...flew up. It did.

“Pffft!”

Blood jetted from Dahak’s nose, and he fell unconscious on the spot. He lay there on the ground for quite some time before someone found him.

Just what had he seen in that instant? What had been reflected in his eyes? What manner of weapon was it that he had been assaulted with? This was a highly confidential secret that only he would ever know.

This is important, so it bears repeating: this is a secret that must never be revealed. There is no need to reveal it.

“Dearie me, what a naughty wind and a naughty boy.”

Golden Sage and Silver Saint

Back when they were young, Princess Shutola Trycen, the First Princess of Trycen, and Colette Deramilius, the Oracle of Deramis, had attended school together in Lumiest, the Academic City, on the Western Continent. As one of the most distinguished education institutions in the world, many students came from families of royals, nobles, or extremely influential powerbrokers. Even while among those of such eminent standing, however, these two successors to the heads of the major powers of Trycen and Deramis on the Eastern Continent commanded unparalleled attention.

This pair had met a few times before, but Lumiest was where they first experienced throwing themselves into studies side by side. Neither of them were very athletic, but rumor had it their academic ability placed them among the top students the school had ever seen. In fact, they ended up skipping multiple grades. The names “Golden Sage” and “Silver Saint” sprang out of nowhere and stuck. It was the first time either of them had encountered

someone as brilliant as themselves, so they naturally grew interested in each other. They also happened to be very close in age and quickly hit it off and grew thick as thieves.

“Shutola-chan, what is your dream for the future?”

“Me? Um...this is a secret, okay? I want a biiiiig teddy bear like *this*! So big that I can’t put my arms all the way around it!”

“Aww, that sounds so wonderful! Now I want one too!”

“What about you, Colette-chan? Tell me!”

“Following your example...I’d want a life-sized figure of Melfina-sama. If possible, I’d want three copies—one to preserve, one to use, and one to proselytize with. By all means.”

“You’re so greedy, Colette-chan! But I think that’s a really nice dream.”

When alone, the pair had a lot of fun innocently talking about things they would never mention in front of other people. Despite possessing knowledge rivaling most adults, these girls certainly struck a very picturesque image when happily chatting and laughing like those of their age, prompting others around them to send warm glances their way.

“Also, I want to marry my daddy in the future! And esteemed brother Azgrad too!” Shutola’s smile was the very image of childish innocence. Making such precocious claims was a privilege of those her age.

“And you call me greedy, ha ha.”

“There’s no way I can choose between them! Who would you want to marry, then, Colette-chan?”

“I have only one person in my heart: Melfina-sama. I will dedicate my whole life to her service.” Colette’s smile was more one of conviction than innocence. This Silver Saint would eventually have the opportunity to bring the full weight of these emotions of hers to bear, but let’s not talk about such...um...matters of religious piety at this time.

“Colette-chan is so faithful!”

“I am the Oracle, after all.”

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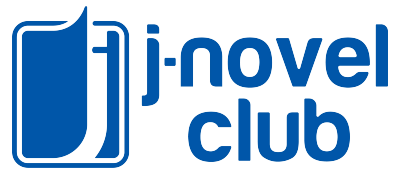
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by Doufu Mayoi

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